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Lean meeting buyer's expectations, enhanced supplier productivity and compliance capabilities in garment industry

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Lean meeting buyer's expectations, enhanced supplier productivity and compliance capabilities in garment-industry

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Lean meeting buyer's expectations, enhanced supplier productivity and compliance capabilities in garment-industry

Abstract

Purpose – Investigate the potential of using 'lean' in garment supplier factories to enhance productivity and compliance capability, so as to fulfil a buyer's expectation of lower price, shorter lead time, and higher occupational health and safety (OHS) standards.

Design/methodology/approach – By means of an intervention, lean tools integrated with OHS elements were introduced in four Bangladeshi key garment suppliers of a Danish buyer. By employing a qualitative approach, both quantitative and qualitative techniques were used to collect data on productivity, OHS, and buyer-supplier efforts.

Findings – This study demonstrates that lean tools, integrated with OHS elements, can be used to improve the productivity and compliance capabilities of supplier firms which meet a buyers' changing demands for lower prices, shorter lead times, and higher compliance standards. This study suggests that the improvement of productivity and OHS in supplier firms through lean implementation could be a better choice for buyers than switching to new suppliers with uncertainties in productivity and delivery, as well as OHS compliance problems.

Practical implications – The findings of this study suggest that garment suppliers can benefit from implementing lean, thereby improving their capacity to meet buyers' expectations. Therefore, both suppliers and buyers have a mutual interest in the application of lean in suppliers' production facilities.

Originality/Value – By considering both buyer and supplier perspectives, this research is a unique attempt to investigate the possibilities of lean implementation at the shop-floor level to meet the market challenges in the context of a developing country.

Keywords Buyer-Supplier Relationships, Occupational Health & Safety, Sustainability

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Shorter fashion life cycles and decreasing garment prices are two characteristics of the modern garment industry (Bruce *et al.*, 2004; Jeacle, 2015). As the fashion cycle is becoming shorter under competitive market conditions, buyers in the global garment supply chain are forced to secure product delivery within a short lead time, yet still with strong price competitiveness. This development ultimately affects the garment supplier firms in developing countries when they respond to buyers' expectations for developing production capabilities (Bruce and Daly, 2006). Moreover, large garment brands need to maintain their brand reputation by ensuring compliance with a code of conduct in the supplier firms (Oka, 2010). In this situation, buyers seeking the lowest price, shortest lead time, and highest level of compliance with those standards can put both productivity and compliance performance at risk (Niinimäki and Hassi, 2011). Therefore, the question is what possibilities exist to meet buyer expectations in relation to enhancing productivity and OHS compliance capability.

Limited research, so far, has been carried out on exploring how suppliers can meet these challenges. Some studies indicate that enhancing production capabilities through lean implementation can be a possible strategy in the garment industry to meet productivity challenges (Vijayakumar and Robinson, 2016; Wickramasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2017). However, research suggests that although lean can improve productivity and shorten lead times, lean implementation may jeopardize OHS conditions (Jackson and Mullarkey, 2000; Lingam *et al.*, 2015; Hamja *et al.*, 2018). It is, therefore, an open question of whether lean implementation in supplier factories can meet the buyers' expectations of both productivity and OHS compliance. To answer our research question regarding the possibility of simultaneously improving productivity and compliance, we designed buyer-supported lean intervention initiatives with an integrated OHS focus in four supplier factories related to the buyer in the context of the Bangladeshi garment industry.

Bangladesh is the second-largest garment exporting country in the world and has a long tradition of working with leading garment brands (Gereffi and Frederick, 2010; Khan *et al.*, 2018). However, the industry in Bangladesh has faced increased competitive pressure, both globally and domestically, due to the reasons mentioned above (Khan *et al.*, 2018; Maalouf *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, Bangladeshi garment manufacturers have begun to adopt new manufacturing systems,

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3 such as lean, in order to increase productivity (Hamja *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, Bangladesh is a
4 relevant location for studying the garment industry and the possibility of implementing lean to
5 meet buyers' expectations of both productivity and OHS compliance. Implementing these
6 components can form the basis of a more sustainable buyer-supplier relationship. To answer our
7 research question, we designed buyer-supported lean intervention initiatives with an integrated
8 OHS focus in four supplier factories related to the buyer in the context of the Bangladeshi garment
9 industry.

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16 This study contributes to the operations management and buyer-supplier relationships literature by
17 showing that suppliers have a good possibility of meeting buyers' demands by introducing lean
18 with integrated OHS. However, lean implementation is not straightforward, as suppliers often lack
19 competencies in the application of lean and face limited top-management commitment, as well as
20 resistance from lower-level supervisors and workers who fear the loss of jobs due to increased
21 efficiency. Therefore, in order to succeed, buyers need to support their suppliers in developing
22 their capabilities. The benefit for buyers in doing so is that careful lean implementation will
23 contribute to the reduction of production costs and lead times, while at the same time improving
24 OHS conditions.

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32 We start the paper with a discussion of the literature related to the current trends in the fashion and
33 garment industry, the influence of lean on OHS, the buyer-supplier relational dynamics in the
34 fashion/garment industry, and the supplier commitment to sustain lean. We continue with a
35 presentation of the design of the intervention and the subsequent data collection in section three.
36 Then we present an analysis of the results in section four, and a final discussion, with the
37 conclusion presented last.

38 39 40 41 42 43 **2. Literature Review**

44 45 46 ***2.1 Recent trends in the fashion and garment industry***

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48 The fashion industry has recently experienced changing dynamics, such as retailers' increased
49 expectations of lower cost, higher quality, less response time, and delivery flexibility (Bhardwaj
50 and Fairhurst, 2010). Consequently, the success or failure of a retailer in a rapidly changing fashion
51 market depends on its flexibility and quick response to market demands, such as short-notice
52 delivery, the capability to adjust (increase/decrease) order volume, and the rapid inclusion of
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3 consumer choices into the product design (Christopher *et al.*, 2004; Storey *et al.*, 2005). Therefore,
4 fashion retailers create pressure on their garment suppliers to reduce production costs and lead
5 times, and to improve the quality of products in order to be competitive in the market. They also
6 demand an increase in OHS standards due to pressure from consumers and other national and
7 international interests, such as NGOs, the media, and trade agreement demands from Western
8 countries (Hoque and Rana, 2019; Hamja *et al.*, 2019; Khan *et al.*, 2018; Neu *et al.*, 2014).
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14 These fashion market trends force both buyers and suppliers to adopt new operational strategies
15 rather than depend on a traditional structured mass production system (Christopher *et al.*, 2004).
16 Lean manufacturing system is one of the operational strategies used to tackle the current market
17 challenges by improving supplier production and compliance capabilities (Li *et al.*, 2017). Lean
18 manufacturing system is built on the Toyota Production System, and it is suggested as a
19 manufacturing strategy to make the American auto industry more competitive (Womack *et al.*,
20 1990; Liker, 2004). Shah and Ward (2007:791) define lean manufacturing as “an integrated socio-
21 technical system whose main objective is to eliminate waste by concurrently reducing or
22 minimizing supplier, customer, and internal variability.” Some of the most common lean tools
23 include Value Stream Mapping, Kanban, Just-In-Time, Total Productive Maintenance, 5S,
24 Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), Kaizen, Single-Minute Exchange of Dies (SMED), and
25 Multifunctional Teams (Bhamu and Sangwan, 2014; Hasle *et al.*, 2012). Extensive research in lean
26 found a positive link between lean manufacturing and organizational performance
27 (MacDuffie, 1995; Shah and Ward, 2003; Wu, 2003). The lean production system is adopted in
28 many industries, and it has proved its effectiveness to improve efficiency, productivity, product
29 quality, and reduce production costs and lead times (Liker and Wu, 2000; Hopp and Spearman,
30 2004; Bhamu *et al.*, 2012; Arif-Uz-Zaman and Ahsan, 2014; Rampasso *et al.*, 2017; Singh *et al.*,
31 2018; Haerizadeh and Sunder, 2019). Although originally developed for the automotive industry,
32 in the last decade lean has also been applied in the textile and garment industry and has shown a
33 positive impact on productivity performance (Videla, 2006; Marudhamuthu, 2011; Smadi, 2012;
34 Jabbour *et al.*, 2014; Lingam *et al.*, 2015; Gamage *et al.*, 2017). Several lean tools have been found
35 to have a positive effect, among others 5S (Agrahari *et al.*, 2015), kaizen (Quddus and Ahsan,
36 2014), SMED (Marudhamuthu, 2011), and quick response manufacturing (Locke and Romis,
37 2007).
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2.2 Impact of lean implementation on OHS

The effect of lean on workers' health is a debated issue in research. Several researchers, especially in the early implementation of lean, point towards a detrimental effect on workers' health and safety (Harrison, 1994; Landsbergis et al., 1999; Conti et al., 2006). A later review showed that the adverse effects were, in particular, related to manual assembly tasks (Hasle et al., 2012). The possible consequence is that lean causes a higher intensity of repetitive strain injuries (RSI) (Buckle and Devereux, 2002; Muggleton et al., 1999). As sewing operations are highly repetitive, it is quite possible that there may be adverse effects. In particular, it has also been convincingly proven that the repetitive tasks of sewing machine operators carry a high risk of RSI (Öztürk and Esin, 2011; Sealetsa and Thatcher, 2011), especially in regard to repetitive movements and sitting postures (Delleman and Dul, 2002). Other studies report that garment workers in South East Asian garment factories suffer from musculoskeletal disorders of the upper body parts – neck, shoulder, arm, hand and back - as well as poor morale and high worker turnover (Chan et al., 2002; Sarder et al., 2006).

However, a review study indicates that the effects of lean depending on the actual application of lean (Hasle et al., 2012), and one recent study on the Bangladeshi garment industry indicates a short term positive impact of lean implementation on muscle fatigue and pain (Hamja et al., 2019). A parallel review of the lean in garment found ambiguous results regarding the health outcome but with a tendency towards positive effects (Brännmark and Håkansson, 2012). Furthermore, the literature suggests that suppliers tend to focus on lean as an opportunity to increase productivity and thus often neglect OHS in the garment industry (Raworth and Kidder, 2009). Thus, the effects of lean on workers' health in the garments industry are still unsettled, and the research also provides good arguments for paying particular attention to OHS during lean implementation.

By doing so, lean may be utilized to improve the ergonomic arrangement of the workstation, reduce equipment and materials, and remove obstacles that cause muscular strain. These changes have already been suggested in some studies of the garment industry (Marudhamuthu *et al.*, 2011; Vijayakumar and Robinson, 2016). For example, poor workstation design in the form of an inappropriate height or size of sewing table, seat, and workspace has been shown to have a negative

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3 effect on productivity (Megeid *et al.*, 2011). The literature further suggests a number of measures
4 that can improve the work environment. For the physical arrangement of the workplace, Parimalam
5 *et al.* (2006) recommend improvements in the form of adjusting the height sewing tables for
6 various operations, using appropriate lighting, employing noise control through routine
7 maintenance of machines, utilizing earplugs and earmuffs, using local exhaust ventilation,
8 equipping workers with dust protectors, having a standard distance between machines, redesigning
9 blade guards and fabric cutting tools, and holding regular safety meetings with workers. There
10 have also been suggestions for organizational changes such as task rotations, decreased work
11 hours, and increased rest periods, modifications that may reduce upper body musculoskeletal pains
12 (Wang *et al.*, 2007).
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21 **2.3 Buyer-supplier relational dynamics in the fashion/garment industry**

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23 The buyer-supplier relationship dynamics in the fashion and garment industry have long been
24 investigated (Crewe and Davenport, 1992), and there are primarily two types of relationships that
25 have been identified: transaction orientation and relationship orientation (Han *et al.*, 1993; Heide
26 and Stump, 1995; Tangpong *et al.*, 2015; Hoque and Rana, 2019).
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31 Transaction orientation is characterized by short-term discrete transactions, one-time relations,
32 frequent switching of suppliers, limited communication, and only sharing legal contractual
33 information (Benton and Maloni, 2005). Hoque and Rana (2019) defined the transaction-oriented
34 buyer-supplier relationship as an adversarial, arms-length, and individual transactions-based
35 competitive relationship to achieve short-term organizational objectives. Transaction-oriented
36 relationships create opportunistic behaviour whereby the buyer-supplier relationship contains less
37 trust and commitment than would typically exist (Campbell, 1997). In contrast, relational
38 governance controls opportunistic behaviour through a written contract, and relies upon trust,
39 commitment, cooperation and collaboration-based exchange relations (Hawkins *et al.*, 2008). The
40 assumption is that the relational governance between buyer and supplier acts as a safeguard of the
41 supplier's opportunism and facilitates long-term collaboration (Lee *et al.*, 2018).
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51 The trend is for especially large international buyers to move towards a collaborative partnership
52 relationship with suppliers with a focus on issues such as delivery time, quality, cost, and
53 compliance (Soh *et al.*, 2016). Studies show that the collaborative buyer-supplier relationship
54 improves relationship outcomes, such as risk and reward sharing, joint-product development, and
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3 business outcomes, such as market share, cash flow, and lead time (Cousins and Lawson, 2007).
4 Close relationships have also been found to offer improvements at the operational level, such as
5 in quality, delivery, and cost reduction (Kannan and Tan, 2006). A key point is that maintaining a
6 collaborative relationship involves commitment and investment from buyers to develop and
7 increase suppliers' capabilities, and this involvement is the focus of our discussion in the next
8 section.
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14 Supplier development is defined by Krause and Ellram (1997:21) as "any effort of a buying firm
15 with its supplier(s) to increase the performance and/or capabilities of the supplier and meet the
16 buying firm's supply needs." Supplier development can be summarized into four main strategies:
17 1) competitive pressure (giving more business to suppliers to motivate suppliers to improve
18 performance); 2) evaluation and certification systems (helping suppliers understand buyers'
19 expectations and thus improve their performance); 3) incentives (motivating by providing
20 incentives such as recognition, cost-sharing savings, and assuring large future business volumes);
21 and 4) direct involvement (making capital and equipment investments in supplier operations,
22 partially acquiring the supplier firm, and investing in human and organizational resources) (Krause
23 *et al.*, 2000). The direct involvement is the most relevant option when studying the possibilities of
24 using lean as a tool to upgrade both productivity and OHS. It can involve activities such as frequent
25 routine visits, easy communication with frequent information sharing, and sending experts who
26 advise and train suppliers' employees (Sako, 2004; Krause *et al.*, 2007; Govindan *et al.*, 2010).
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37 ***2.4 Supplier commitment to sustaining lean implementation initiatives***

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40 Direct involvement may be particularly relevant as the literature reports that applying and
41 sustaining lean comprehensively is not straightforward (Abolhassani *et al.*, 2016; Hopp, 2018).
42 Therefore, buyers in other industries have supported lean development in their suppliers. This issue
43 has in particular been studied in automotive industry suppliers (Jabbour *et al.*, 2014; Bhamu and
44 Sangwan, 2014; Dyer and Nobeoka, 2000). Toyota is especially well known for collaborating
45 systematically with suppliers, facilitating the transfer of lean technology and knowledge from
46 Toyota to the supplier companies (Dyer and Nobeoka, 2000). On a less comprehensive scale,
47 Bhamu and Sangwan (2014) suggest internal and external education and training programmes for
48 learning lean tools and techniques in addition to hands-on training at the supervisory level for
49 identifying and categorizing waste. Although the buyers' support of lean application in garment
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3 suppliers has not yet been studied, it seems plausible, and moreover it should be expected, that
4 supplier support is also important for the successful application of lean in this industry. The
5 sustainability of any lean implementation initiative depends on the supplier firms' understanding
6 of lean and its application, regular training of employees and workers, monitoring and controlling
7 lean initiatives, and management and employee commitment to lean initiatives to deliver long-
8 term benefits (Angelis *et al.*, 2011; Mostafa *et al.*, 2013; Jobin, 2015). Top management
9 commitment and leadership play a particularly critical role in implementing and sustaining lean
10 initiatives (Alefari *et al.*, 2017; Sreedharan and Sunder, 2018, Netland, 2016).

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18 Based on the literature, there are good arguments for applying lean in the garment industry in order
19 to meet productivity and competition-related challenges and to ensure that buyers also benefit from
20 lean. However, the literature is less clear about how OHS will be affected by lean and what the
21 role of buyers could be in its introduction, in particular with improving supplier firms' sustainable
22 capabilities and balancing productivity and OHS. This current study contributes to closing this gap
23 in this literature.
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30 **3. Research Design**

31 This intervention study is part of a larger DANIDA research project studying lean, productivity,
32 and OHS (see the acknowledgements). The project is designed to investigate the possibilities of
33 implementing lean with the aim of improving both productivity and OHS. We followed a
34 qualitative approach using a multiple embedded case study method (Yin, 2014). We used both
35 quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques to investigate the impact of lean tools on
36 productivity and OHS performance and why and how lean can transform and being sustainable in
37 supplier factories to meet buyers' expectations of lower prices, shorter lead times, and higher OHS
38 standards.
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46 **3.1 Intervention design**

47 The intervention is divided into three phases: a) baseline study, b) implementation, and c) follow
48 up. In the baseline study, the existing productivity and OHS conditions of the supplier factories
49 were measured. In the implementation stage, the specific lean tools and OHS issues were
50 implemented and measured. In the follow-up stage, the sustainability of the intervention project
51 was observed (Hamja *et al.*, 2018; Eira *et al.*, 2015). One Danish buyer operating in Bangladesh
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3 and its four key suppliers from the Bangladeshi garment industry were selected for this study. We
4 selected the Danish buyer as it is the knowledge partner of the DANIDA research project, while
5 its four key suppliers were chosen based on the following case selection criteria: a) key suppliers
6 since they produce a large volume of goods for the buyer and the buyer maintains a long-term
7 cooperative relationship with them, which is important when establishing new initiatives in
8 supplier factories; b) large suppliers since they are more capable of implementing new initiatives
9 than medium and small suppliers; and c) top-ranked key suppliers since these are more compliant
10 and generally follow standard operating procedures, thereby facilitating the implementation of our
11 intervention initiatives. The Danish buyer is denoted 'DB' and the four key suppliers are denoted
12 'S1', 'S2', 'S3', and 'S4' hereafter to maintain the anonymity of the buyer and suppliers. DB has
13 been active in Bangladesh since 2005 and, currently, has around 80 suppliers from which it is
14 sourcing. The main characteristics of the supplier firms are presented in Table I.

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25 [Table I about here]

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29 In each factory, the researchers, together with the factory management, selected a pilot sewing line
30 for the lean intervention (see Table II).

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36 [Table II about here]

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40 Two teams were formed in each factory to conduct the intervention initiatives: a core team
41 comprised of five members from top and mid-management and an operational team comprised of
42 five to seven members from the top, middle, and first-line management. The operational team
43 members received three-day training sessions, which covered lean tools and OHS improvement
44 techniques. The operational team subsequently introduced the same lean and OHS learning to the
45 workers and other colleagues in their respective factories, and worked on lean and OHS
46 improvements in the selected line. In addition to conducting the three training sessions, the
47 researchers frequently visited the supplier factories to assist with the implementation of lean and
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OHS improvements. Together with the core and operational teams in each factory, we monitored and controlled the selected pilot line so that it was unaffected by the other lines on the same floor.

Four lean tools and two OHS issues were selected as the most important and realistic items in which the operational teams could achieve sufficient competence to apply in practice (see Table III).

[Table III about here]

3.2 Data collection and measurements

Both quantitative and qualitative data collected concurrently from multiple sources, including first-hand data from shopfloor workers, personal interviews with key management personnel, direct observation, and reviewing documents (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Quantitative data was collected through four main lean measures, namely value stream mapping (VSM), 5S, defects per hundred units (DHU), single minute exchange of die (SMED) (see Table IV), and the two OHS assessments of machine safety and ergonomics (see Table V).

[Table IV about here]

For OHS, we used four machine safety items and four ergonomic (sitting position) items as a proxy for the work environment and the risk to workers' health and safety (see Table V).

[Table V about here]

Qualitative data was collected by interviewing managers and workers in the buyer and supplier firms (see Table VI) through face-to-face, personal, in-depth interviews with key informants in multiple settings (Yin, 2014). While the buyers' data was collected from their Dhaka office and headquarters in Denmark, the suppliers' data was collected from their factories.

[Table VI about here]

An interview guide was used for the in-depth interviews, which at the supplier firms were conducted partly in Bangla and partly in English, since one of the authors is a native speaker of Bangla; and the buyer's interviews were conducted in English. Some of the interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees and supplemented by written notes; and rest of the interviews were only recorded in written notes as interviewees were not comfortable in audio recording. The interviews lasted 30-90 minutes with every manager and 10-30 minutes with every worker. Only relevant and necessary quotes were transcribed. Secondary data was collected from the buyer and suppliers' websites and different online sources. In addition, various documents were collected, such as line layouts, committee lists, meeting minutes, policy papers, audit reports, DHU reports, and compliance reports.

3.3 Data analysis

The basic analysis consisted of comparing before and after data in order to assess the outcome of the intervention. For the quantitative data, the researchers compared before and after measures and then used the qualitative data to support and further elaborate the quantitative findings. In particular, the researchers compared high and low performers – polar cases (Yin, 2014). We summarize the results in an assessment of suppliers' commitment to lean as well as an assessment of the expected sustainability of the lean changes. The criteria of the assessment are described in Table VII. We also analysed the buyer's current role in the suppliers' productivity and OHS improvements, and their requirements for sustaining the implemented lean initiatives. The data validity is enhanced by using multiple sources of evidence in the data triangulation and by sharing a draft case report with the respondents to receive their comments (Yin, 2014).

[Table VII about here]

4. Results

4.1 Outcome of the intervention initiatives

After implementing the lean tools, most of the suppliers experienced positive changes, although some changes showed relatively small improvements (see Table VIII). However, for VSM, 5S, DHU, and SMED there were also a few cases where the development was either unchanged or negative. Overall, however, results were higher productivity with a potential for shorter lead times and thereby also more flexibility and faster delivery.

[Table VIII about here]

After implementing the OHS initiatives, the assessment shows that all suppliers experienced positive changes, although some of the changes were rather small; however, it was mainly the suppliers with the greatest problems that made the largest changes (see Table IX). All suppliers used belt covers on their machines, making it unnecessary to depict this result in the table.

[Table IX about here]

4.2 Buyer involvement in supplier productivity and OHS capability development

The Danish buyer (DB) follows a policy of developing trust-based cooperative long-term relationships with its suppliers. The DB's country manager stated: "We treat our suppliers as our family members." This cooperative relationship helps the DB understand the necessary productivity and OHS support requirements of suppliers. The DB believes that only close long-term relations can ensure its suppliers are responsible for productivity and OHS initiatives.

The DB rates its suppliers' according to their performance, based on their on-time delivery and expected quality, and also regularly audits its suppliers, sometimes using its own team and sometimes using an independent third-party auditing firm. Based on the issues identified in each audit, the DB sets a corrective and preventive action plan (CAP) for each supplier to improve

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3 productivity and OHS KPIs within a given deadline. The DB not only identifies problems but also
4 assists suppliers in solving them. The DB has its own health and safety guidelines, which act as an
5 instructional tool in identifying and solving health and safety problems in supplier factories.
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9 The DB motivates its suppliers to achieve new milestones and appreciate new achievement. For
10 example, DB suppliers have achieved various certificates, such as Worldwide Responsible
11 Accredited Production (WRAP) and the Business Social Compliance Initiative (BSCI), which
12 approve suppliers' productivity standards and compliance excellence. The DB believes that its
13 suppliers' certificate achievements are indicators of developing their greatest ability. The
14 sustainability manager of the DB stated: "Before selecting a supplier, we check how many
15 certificates and memberships they have, and after selection, we continuously motivate them to
16 achieve new certificates and to get new memberships."
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23 It is furthermore the policy of the DB to provide necessary support for the development of its
24 suppliers, including supporting training programmes and offering expert advice. This support
25 covers both supplier productivity and OHS development. Due to supplier demand, the DB
26 occasionally sends its local and foreign experts to the key supplier factories to solve problems. For
27 example, the DB's design development teams and its suppliers work together to develop new
28 designs. The DB has dedicated teams that regularly follow up on productivity and OHS
29 development activities as well as track improvement in supplier factories. The sustainability
30 manager of the DB stated: "Our sustainability team regularly visits our supplier factories for
31 process improvement, quality checks, and [to] improve compliance standards." If the DB sets any
32 corrective action plan for its suppliers, it follows up on their progress. If suppliers fail to follow
33 the set time frame, the DB helps them to achieve the target, such as working together with suppliers
34 in their factories to solve problems, and sharing new ideas and technological know-how.
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45 The DB considers this intervention project to be in line with its strategy for the development of
46 the capabilities of its suppliers. When the researchers shared the intervention project objectives
47 with the DB, it happily accepted the offer. As the chief representative of the DB mentioned: "We
48 think it is a great opportunity for our suppliers to improve their productivity and compliance
49 condition without any cost." The DB provided the researchers with their full support of the project
50 objectives (lower product prices, shorter lead times, and higher compliance standards) and found
51 that they were similar to their own objectives for supplier development. The sustainability manager
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3 of the DB added: “This project would help our suppliers since they need to improve productivity
4 and reduce lead time to be competitive in the market and maintain standard occupational health
5 and safety (OHS) as per our own, plus local and international, codes of conduct (COC).”
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9 The DB assigned a team comprising of one project manager, one sustainability manager, and two
10 corporate sustainability coordinators to continuously support the researchers either at their office
11 or at the supplier factories. The intervention initiatives in each supplier factory began with an
12 introductory meeting at the DB’s office, in which the top management of both the DB and the
13 supplier firm participated. In the introductory meeting, the DB gained the consent of the suppliers
14 to provide all manner of support to the researchers. The DB’s team accompanied the researchers
15 on the first factory visit at each of the four supplier factories. Moreover, the DB regularly took
16 follow-up inquiries from the researchers regarding the progress of the intervention initiatives.
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18 When researchers faced a challenge, the DB intervened and secured the necessary support from
19 the factory management. For example, when the researchers struggled to receive cooperation from
20 S1, DB’s team visited the factory and assured full support through discussion with the supplier’s
21 top management. When researchers did not receive cooperation from S4’s top management, the
22 DB called the supplier’s top management and accused them of non-cooperation. After that, S4
23 fully cooperated with the researchers. The DB’s management recommended that the suppliers’
24 management take the intervention initiatives seriously and suggested them to learn the tools so that
25 they could continue the same practices after the completion of the intervention to reduce
26 production costs, lead times, and improve OHS standards. As the country manager of the DB
27 stated: “We told the suppliers to learn from the intervention project and implement the same tools
28 in all lines of the factories.” The DB was already running an initiative, named the HER Project, in
29 the four supplier factories, a programme intended to empower female workers and make them
30 aware of health-related issues. As the researchers’ OHS initiatives were in line with the objectives
31 of the HER project, the intervention expedited the project. Moreover, the DB started a quality
32 improvement programme called Accredited Quality Controller (AQC) during the project
33 intervention in order to develop a quality team in each supplier factory that could identify and
34 independently solve quality problems. The quality assurance manager of DB stated: “We are very
35 happy with your intervention project as we think that lean implementation not only has a positive
36 impact on production cost and lead time reduction, but also has a positive impact on product quality
37 improvement.” Throughout the entire duration of the intervention, the researchers shared regular
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3 updates on the intervention progress with the DB's responsible team. In addition, the researchers
4 shared their final intervention findings, future possibilities, and the DB's necessary future actions
5 to sustain the initiatives. The DB's support not only helped in the implementation of the lean
6 initiatives, but also became critical to sustaining the implemented lean initiatives.
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10 ***4.3 Supplier commitment and sustaining initiatives***

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13 During the intervention process, the four suppliers demonstrated different levels of commitment
14 and capability in regard to implementing lean. In addition, it was observed that the employees did
15 not know who was responsible for what, or which section was responsible for which tasks. For
16 instance, the production department thought that productivity improvement was the responsibility
17 of the industrial engineering (IE) department, and the IE department thought that the production
18 department was responsible for these tasks. Moreover, supervisors and workers were in fear of
19 losing their jobs if they proved to be insufficiently qualified to work with the lean changes. The
20 line supervisor of S2 stated: "If our company implements lean in this factory, we will lose our jobs
21 as we do not have the academic qualifications." Likewise, one worker for S4 mentioned: "We
22 know from the workers in another factory that many of them lost their jobs due to lean
23 implementation."
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33 Based on the above experience, we conducted an assessment of the suppliers' commitment to lean
34 and OHS implementation. The assessment was, as outlined in the methodology, based on the
35 interviews and observations conducted during the entire intervention process. The results revealed
36 that none of the suppliers demonstrated a high level of commitment (see Table X). Three suppliers
37 reached a medium level of commitment, whereby their top and mid-management were much more
38 involved in the intervention initiatives than the low level observed in S2. These suppliers also had
39 some experience from prior lean initiatives in their factories and their industrial engineers had
40 some lean knowledge. Furthermore, their top management was directly or indirectly involved in
41 the lean implementation initiatives. For example, a director, a general manager of quality, a general
42 manager of planning, and a production manager of S3 were all directly involved in the intervention
43 initiatives. The general managers of quality and planning developed their own teams in
44 conjunction with our operational and core teams so that their teams could capture the intervention
45 process and implement the same process in other lines after completion of the intervention. The
46 director always followed up on the progress of the intervention initiatives and directed others to
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3 provide the necessary support. The three suppliers also proved that they were able to secure a
4 certain, although far from perfect, level of cooperation and coordination between top management
5 and lower-level management and workers.
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10 In the case of S2, they did not show the necessary commitment, and neither their top management
11 nor their senior managers were involved in the implementation of the lean project. We observed
12 that from the very beginning, the top and mid-management of S2 transferred their responsibilities
13 to the first-line management. The operation head of S2 stated: “We are prepared to provide all
14 sorts of support to the researchers and operational team.” However, in practice, top management’s
15 support and involvement were insignificant during the intervention. The low level of commitment
16 manifested itself in the intervention project’s poorest overall productivity outcome.
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26 [Table X about here]
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30 It is well established that it can be difficult for companies to sustain their lean implementation. In
31 this study, the four suppliers showed great variation regarding their commitment to sustaining the
32 initiatives. Of the four suppliers, S3 undertook the most significant sustainability initiatives. Their
33 highly competent and experienced top and mid-management were open to receiving new
34 knowledge, were fully involved in our intervention initiatives, and started to implement the same
35 lean tools in all lines in the plant. The general manager of S3 stated: “Already we have formed a
36 kaizen team for lean tools and OHS implementation, and the team is responsible for providing
37 training to workers and line supervisors and for assuring a continuous process and OHS
38 improvement.” S1 and S4 took small-scale initiatives, such as the application of 5S, DHU, machine
39 safety, and ergonomic implementations, in a few additional lines. The IE manager of S1 shared:
40 “Our industrial engineering and compliance teams have started to implement some of the lean and
41 OHS tools in some lines, and we are thinking of gradually expanding the same initiatives to other
42 lines so that we can satisfy buyers’ demand of lower product cost, higher OHS standard, and
43 shorter lead time.” The HR, administration, and compliance manager of S4 stated: “We are very
44 interested in the training on productivity and OHS that our staffs have received from your
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3 intervention, and our management is thinking of providing the same training to other staff so that
4 they can produce more by maintaining higher OHS standards.” In contrast, S2 showed low levels
5 of interest in sustaining lean implementation. According to our observation in the follow-up stage,
6 no workers or first-line managers at S2 received any lean training before starting the lean
7 intervention initiatives. Furthermore, since the intervention project ended, the supplier stopped its
8 lean initiative and did not plan on implementing any future lean training to improve its capabilities
9 to capture lean benefits, e.g. lower production costs through higher productivity, shorter shipment
10 lead times, and higher OHS standards. Its top management had no follow-up plan for the lean
11 initiatives.
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19 One of the important barriers to the sustainability of suppliers’ lean application is the widespread
20 job switching tendency of mid and first-line management, and workers at all suppliers. However,
21 this tendency was lower in S3, which showed the best results of all suppliers.
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25 **5. Discussion**

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27 This study shows that a lean intervention with a shared focus on both productivity and OHS leads
28 to improvements in both issues. All four suppliers achieved improvements during the relatively
29 short time of intervention, although the improvements are in some cases relatively low and do not
30 constitute a large jump in productivity or OHS. However, this result is based on changes to a single
31 pilot line in factories with limited or no prior knowledge of lean. Therefore, the intervention
32 initiative is a small first step in lean transformation and may bring confidence to supplier
33 management to extend the same initiatives to the whole factory.
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40 There can be several reasons a larger jump in productivity and greater OHS improvements can be
41 constrained. One reason is the suppliers’ limited experience and qualifications in lean and in
42 introducing organizational changes in general. The difficulties in coordinating between
43 departments and the uncertainty among first-line managers and workers were the other reasons.
44 Another reason was the insufficient direct involvement from the top management in the
45 intervention initiatives. The DB realized this and tried to emphasize the need for substantial
46 involvement from top management by requiring the owners to participate in meetings at the
47 buyer’s office, but as the results show, only three suppliers achieved moderate top management
48 support. Hence, the study shows a variation in the percentage of productivity and OHS
49 improvement across the suppliers due to the variation in lean orientation, top management
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3 involvement, and commitment across the cases. The results of the intervention were achieved by
4 involving the buyer. Therefore, it is questionable whether there would have been the same levels
5 of factory managements' commitment and cooperation in implementing the initiatives had the
6 buyer not been involved or been only minimally involved.
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10 The above-mentioned problems with limited top management commitment, generally low
11 competence in lean changes, and role uncertainty may explain the limited achievements by some
12 suppliers; and also, the apparent constraints for the further expansion of lean in the suppliers. These
13 results are in the same line of previous research findings (Lodgaard *et al.*, 2016; Netland, 2016;
14 Nordin *et al.*, 2012; Turesky and Connell, 2010; Worley and Doolen, 2006). For suppliers to fully
15 benefit from the lean application and to secure both productivity and OHS improvements, they
16 must take a series of initiatives:
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- 23 • Increase top management knowledge about lean in order to achieve stronger interest and
24 thereby commitment to changes.
- 25 • In-depth training of core staff in middle management and specialists in lean and OHS tools and
26 their application.
- 27 • Basic training of supervisors and workers on the lean approach and how these approaches are
28 related to OHS.
- 29 • Implement organizational changes that clarify roles and secure cross-functional collaboration,
30 such as through incentive systems that promote collaboration.
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38 The previous literature supports similar initiatives on lean (Abolhassani *et al.*, 2016; Lodgaard *et*
39 *al.*, 2016; Netland, 2016; Jadhav *et al.*, 2014; Turesky and Connell, 2010).
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42 Considered from a buyer's perspective, this study shows that not only suppliers but also buyers
43 can benefit if suppliers are able to develop their capabilities. As suppliers are producing products
44 for the buyers, the higher productivity and better compliance capabilities of suppliers indicate
45 higher value creation for those buyers. Thus, the buyer in this study was highly involved in the
46 project by recruiting the firms and putting pressure on the owners and top managers to commit to
47 the lean implementation process. Nevertheless, the suppliers in this study had difficulties in
48 extensive lean implementation even with strong assistance from the researchers. There is,
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3 therefore, a need for buyers to be involved in a lean transformation to achieve the potential benefits
4 fully.
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7 Our results indicate that buyers need to work on two levels. First, they should support the
8 development of a supplier's top management's motivations and understanding because top
9 management must understand the perspectives and benefits of lean and its connection to OHS
10 improvements, and also to be motivated to implement it. Second, buyers need to provide the
11 necessary support for the actual lean implementation, which most likely involves two elements,
12 namely training and following up with advice and support. Without such buyer support, it is likely
13 that even though the suppliers have trained staff, they will run into problems and if these problems
14 are not addressed, they will eventually terminate the implementation.
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24 **6. Conclusions**

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26 Research on the potential to utilize lean to improve productivity and OHS for the benefit of both
27 suppliers and buyers has so far been limited. In this study, we demonstrate that lean
28 implementation with a focus on integrating OHS has a positive impact on both productivity and
29 OHS. Therefore, lean can be a valuable tool to improve suppliers' production and compliance
30 (OHS) capabilities, thereby meeting buyer expectations. The findings contribute to the
31 understanding of how buyer-supplier relationships could be improved in the garment industry.
32 Both buyers and suppliers could benefit from implementing lean, and there is potential for
33 developing stronger buyer-supplier relationships with less opportunistic behaviour, which would
34 assure the future sustainability of their business relationship. This research prescribes solutions for
35 suppliers who are concerned about their survival and growth, as well as for buyers who are thinking
36 about other outsourcing options due to Bangladeshi garment suppliers' limited capabilities.
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46 However, lean implementation is not a simple task. It is difficult for top management to commit
47 sufficiently to lean transformation, while lower-level management generally lacks both
48 qualifications and incentives. It is, therefore, pertinent that buyers become involved in the process
49 by supporting the development of their suppliers' production capacity. There are several
50 possibilities for such support. The basis is an extended relationship and the key elements are
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support not only through incentives and audits but also directly through lean capability in the supplier production facilities.

This study considers only a single pilot sewing line on the shop floor of four supplier factories. Thus, the findings represent only a part of the whole scene in each of the supplier companies and in the industry as a whole. Moreover, it was difficult to isolate and control the line fully as workers in the line are somewhat affected by workers in other lines on the same shop floor. Therefore, it would be important to use longitudinal studies covering the entire lean transformation process to demonstrate what is needed to achieve its full benefits. This study only considers a single buyer from the Nordic region, whereas every supplier works for several buyers. It would, therefore, be relevant to examine the relationship modes between a supplier and its different buyers. Taking into consideration how the variations in these relationships affect their lean implementation initiatives in supplier factories would also be beneficial. It would also be relevant to study national differences and compare Bangladesh to other garment exporting countries where suppliers may have different conditions and interact differently with their buyers. It could furthermore be relevant to study the possibilities for further development of lean implementation in the garment industry into the more advanced approaches such as lean six sigma.

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Table I. Characteristics of the supplier firms

Name of Supplier	Year of Establishment	Size	Number of Total Lines	Employees	Product Type	Monthly Capacity (pcs)	Supplier Rating by the Buyer*	Length of Relationship with the Buyer (year)
S1	2006	Large	24	3,145	Woven	6,00,000	Yellow	10
S2	2005	Large	18	2,286	Woven	2,50,000	Yellow	11
S3	1999	Large	110	8,424	Knit	3,640,000	Yellow	13
S4	2013	Large	14	1,500	Woven & Knit	3,20,000	Yellow	6

*Supplier rating: red (unacceptable critical non-compliant, and high risk), orange (serious non-compliant and considered risky), yellow (acceptable minor non-compliant and very low risk), green (no non-compliance issues and no risks), and blue (new factory with minor non-compliance and low-risk issues, with temporary approval obtained).

Table II. Summary description of the selected pilot lines

Supplier Firms	Selected Line	Product Type	Duration of Intervention (Weeks)	No. of Workstations	No. of Workers	No. of Supervisors in the Selected Line
S-1	23	Long-sleeve shirts	24	57	57	2
S-2	F	Trousers	24	53	53	2
S-3	B5	Round-neck T-shirts	26	28	28	1
S-4	10	Ladies tops	26	49	49	2

Table III. Selected lean and OHS tools

Selected tools	Implemented initiatives	Objectives
VSM	Solve bottlenecks, remove unnecessary motions through motion study, reduce bundle size, fix work-in-progress (WIP), assure dynamic maintenance support in the specific line in each of the factories.	Increase value addition
5S	Provide hands-on training to the operators, helpers, and line supervisors; make changes such as reorganizing input racks, label input racks to use specific racks for specific styles; organize necessary worker tools at each station; remove unnecessary thread cones, electric wires, extra fabrics, and standard operating procedures (SOP) of previous styles; make the line neat and clean, keep chairs and workstations within aisles; remove workers' sandals, food boxes, and water bottles from the line.	Improve housekeeping and OHS
DHU	Calculate quality defects, identify possible root causes, and introduce possible solutions.	Defect reduction
SMED	Introduce a six-day plan and assign teams to follow the plan.	Reduce changeover time
Machine safety	Train and motivate line operators and helpers to use belt covers, needle and eye guards, and machine lights.	Improve safety conditions
Ergonomics	Correct motion problems of workers, re-design some workstations, and change sitting posture of operators based on standard head, arm, back, and leg positions.	Enhance ergonomics

Table IV. Productivity measures

Lean Initiatives	Description	Measurement
VSM	Identification of value-added and non-value time in a product's production process.	% of ratio value-added time divided by total time.
5S	Housekeeping conditions of a production shop floor.	% of the average score on a 100-point scale. This builds on the same approach as a 5S score sheet in Quddus and Ahsan (2014).
DHU	Identification of product quality defects per hundred units.	% of defects per hundred units from line quality inspection sheets.
SMED	Converting a manufacturing process from running its current product to running its next product.	Changeover time calculated before and after following the proposed changeover plan.

Table V. OHS Measurement

OHS Initiatives	Description	Measurement
Machine safety	Machine safety based on the use of belt cover, needle guard, eye guard, and machine light.	% of workers using and not using belt covers, needles and eye guards, and machine lights on the production line. Every worker received 1 for using and 0 for not using a belt cover, needle and eye guard, or machine light.
Ergonomics	Sitting position based on head, arm, back, and leg standards set by ILO (2010).	% of acceptable and unacceptable worker sitting positions. Every worker received 1 for acceptable and 0 for an unacceptable head, arm, back, or leg position.

Table VI. Interview details

Supplier & Buyer	Top Management	No. of Interviews	Mid- and Lower-level Management	No. of Interviews	Workers	No. of Interviews
S1	Head of Production; General Manager of Planning; General Manager of HR, Admin & Compliance; Deputy General Manager of Admin & HR; Head of Industrial Engineering; Manager of Industrial Engineering; Assistant General Manager of Merchandising; HR & Compliance Manager; and Factory Manager	9	Executive of Industrial Engineering, Junior Executive of Industrial Engineering, and Line Chief	3	Operators	11
S2	Executive Director, General Manager of Production, Manager of Production, Head of HR & Compliance,	7	Assistant Manager of Time and Work Study,	3	Operators, Helpers	10

	Merchandiser, General Manager of Quality Assurance, and Manager of Quality Assurance		Quality In-charge, and Line Supervisor			
S3	Executive Director; General Manager of Operation; Assistant General Manager of Merchandising & Marketing; Manager of Production; General Manager of Industrial Engineering & Planning; General Manager of Quality Assurance; General Manager of HR & Admin; Deputy Manager of Compliance; and Senior Manager of Admin, HR, & Compliance	9	Assistant Manager of Industrial Engineering & Planning, Senior Officer of Production, Management Trainee of Quality Assurance, Quality In-charge, Quality Officer, Auditor of Compliance, Assistant Officer of Maintenance, Officer of Compliance, and Line Supervisor	9	Operators	7
S4	General Manager of Operation; Manager of Admin, HR, & Compliance; Deputy Manager of Admin, HR, & Compliance; Manager of Production; and Manager of Planning; Manager of Quality	6	Officer of Administration, Executive of Production, Executive of Planning, Senior Manager of Quality, Quality In-charge, and Welfare Officer	5	Operators, Helpers	11
Buyer (DB)	Country Manager, Chief Representative, Strategic Sourcing Manager, Sustainability Manager, and Quality Assurance Manager	5	Corporate Sustainability Coordinators, Sustainability Coordinators, and Quality Assurance Coordinators	7	N/A	N/A

Table VII. Suppliers' lean knowledge, commitment and sustainability measurement criteria

Issues	Assessment Criteria		
	High	Medium	Low
Lean commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top management has knowledge about lean and is directly involved in lean projects. • Full cooperation and excellent coordination between management and employees/workers. • Employees/workers are motivated and in full support of lean intervention initiatives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top management has some knowledge about lean and is indirectly involved in lean projects. • Moderate cooperation and necessary coordination between management and employees/workers. • Employees/workers are not fully motivated and are confused about the impact of lean intervention on their jobs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top management has limited knowledge about lean and no involvement in the lean project. • Limited cooperation and lack of coordination between management and employees/workers. • Employees/workers are demotivated and scared of losing their jobs due to the lean intervention.
Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The plant is expanding lean implementation to the whole plant. • Lean training is ongoing for all who are involved in lean. • Top management is following the lean implementation and monitoring key performance indicators (KPIs). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The plant is expanding lean implementation to a few other lines on the same shop floor. • Some training is ongoing for some who are involved in lean. • Top management is not regularly following the lean implementation and is not monitoring KPIs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The plant stopped lean implementation after intervention completion. • All lean training stopped after the completion of the intervention project. • Top management did not do lean follow up.

Table VIII. Summary of the supplier factories' before and after productivity outcomes

Productivity Measures	Outcome	Suppliers			
		S1	S2	S3	S4
Efficiency	Before (%)	59	57	79	47
	After (%)	62	59	80	55
	Improvement (%)	5.1	3.5	1.3	17.0
VSM	Before (%)	1	3	1	2
	After (%)	2	2	2	2
	Improvement (%)	100	-33.3	100	0
5S	Before (score 0-100)	60	57	70	55
	After (score 0-100)	70	50	85	63
	Improvement (%)	16.7	-12.3	21.4	14.6
DHU	Before (%)	6	4.2	5.8	8.3
	After (%)	6	3.5	5.5	6.3
	Improvement (%)	0	-16.7	-5.2	-24.1
SMED	Before (Hours)	17.3	12.4	2.5	5.0
	After (Hours)	16.3	12.7	2.4	4.9
	Improvement (%)	-5.8	2.4	-4.0	-2.0

Table IX. Summary of the supplier factories' before and after OHS status

OHS Measures	Outcome	Suppliers			
		S1	S2	S3	S4
Machine Safety	Needle guard				
	Before (%)	56	82	83	56
	After (%)	88	85	88	95
	Improvement (%)	57.1	3.7	6.0	69.6
	Eye guard				
	Before (%)	70	89	87	65
	After (%)	90	92	95	97
	Improvement (%)	28.6	3.4	9.2	49.2
	Machine light				
	Before (%)	91	94	98	90
	After (%)	95	95	100	99
	Improvement (%)	4.4	1.1	2.0	10.0
Ergonomic	Head Position				
	Before (%)	67	75	82	72
	After (%)	89	94	83	79
	Improvement (%)	32.8	25.3	1.2	9.7
	Arm Position				
	Before (%)	83	95	80	85
	After (%)	92	97	77	87
	Improvement (%)	10.8	2.1	-3.8	2.4

Back Position				
Before (%)	67	90	82	72
After (%)	79	91	83	81
Improvement (%)	17.9	1.1	1.2	12.5
Leg Position				
Before (%)	50	90	68	66
After (%)	92	94	72	77
Improvement (%)	84.0	4.4	5.9	16.7

Table X. Assessment of suppliers' lean commitment and sustainability levels

Supplier	Lean commitment	Lean sustainability initiatives
S-1	Medium	Medium
S-2	Low	Low
S-3	Medium	High
S-4	Medium	Medium