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Improving the Work Effectiveness of Textile Export Agents in Addressing Operational Barriers: A Qualitative Case Study

Maylavalaza Pamela, Gatot Kustiyadji, Aditya Narendra Wardhana, Bambang Tutuko

Fakultas Ekonomi Bisnis, Universitas Internasional Semen Indonesia

maylavalaza.pamela22@student.uisi.ac.id, gatot.kustiyadji@uisi.ac.id, aditya.wardhana@uisi.ac.id,

bambang.tutuko@uisi.ac.id*

Abstract

The decline in textile exports and the increasing complexity of supply chains have intensified operational challenges for small-scale textile export agents. This study aims to identify key operational barriers affecting work effectiveness and to formulate improvement strategies based on practitioners' experiences. A qualitative single-case study was conducted at a privately owned textile export company in Indonesia (Company X). Data were collected through in-depth interviews with two key informants and triangulated with managerial perspectives, limited observation, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework. The findings reveal five interrelated operational barriers: quality inconsistencies and repeated sample revisions; production and delivery delays; weak contractual governance; fragile coordination and communication systems; and psychological pressure arising from export agents' intermediary role. These barriers reduce work effectiveness in terms of quality, speed, dependability, flexibility, and cost. The study proposes three improvement strategies: strengthening contractual governance and sanctions, adopting simple digital systems for coordination and monitoring, and enhancing supplier capacity and quality control, supported by leadership involvement. This study contributes to the governance and coordination literature by highlighting the operational realities of small-scale export agents in developing countries and emphasizing the importance of transitioning from informal, manual practices to structured, digitalized operations.

Keywords: Textile Export Agent, Operational Barriers, Work Effectiveness, Contractual Governance, Supply Chain Digitalization

1. Introduction

In the era of economic globalization, export activities play a crucial role in supporting economic growth in developing countries, including Indonesia. One of Indonesia's leading non-oil and gas export sectors is the textile and textile products (TTP) industry, which contributed significant foreign exchange earnings in 2024 (World Trade Organization, 2024). The success of textile exports is not solely determined by industrial production capacity, but also by the efficiency and effectiveness of supporting actors such as export agents who bridge the interests of international buyers and local producers (suppliers). Export agents, or trading agents, play a strategic role in the global supply chain, particularly in the highly competitive textile sector, which demands strict adherence to delivery timelines and consistent product quality. In practice, export agents serve as intermediaries, managing communication, order processing, quality control, and information flow among the involved parties (Bi et al., 2022). One of the main challenges of this role is managing multiple suppliers simultaneously to meet buyer demand.

In this context, export agents do not divide a single buyer's order among multiple suppliers; instead, they manage multiple suppliers concurrently to fulfill different buyer orders. This operational model requires efficient supplier selection, intensive communication, rigorous quality oversight, and strong managerial capabilities to ensure smooth supply chain operations from upstream to downstream. The complexity of coordinating multiple suppliers elevates the strategic importance of export agents in maintaining supply chain continuity. Therefore, it is essential to examine the sector's contribution more broadly using national export data released by the Ministry of Trade.

Based on data from the Ministry of Trade, Indonesia's textile and textile product exports experienced fluctuations during the 2019-2023 period. These movements were influenced by changes in global demand, international market conditions, and supply chain disruptions. Table 1 presents Indonesia's textile and textile product export values from 2019 to 2023.

Table 1 Export Value of Indonesia's Textile and Textile Products (TTP) from 2019 to 2023

No	Year	Export Value (USD Billion)	Growth (%)	Key Notes
1	2019	12,82	-	Stable performance before the COVID-19 pandemic
2	2020	10,55	-17,7	Decline due to global activity restrictions
3	2021	13,05	+23,7	Recovery of global demand
4	2022	13,77	+5,5	Peak export performance
5	2023	11,63	-15,5	Weakening global demand and supply

Table 1 shows that Indonesia's TTP exports over the past five years have fluctuated. In 2019, export value reached USD 12.82 billion, reflecting stable performance prior to external disruptions. In 2020, exports declined by 17.7% due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted production and international trade. In 2021, TTP exports rebounded sharply by 23.7% in line with the recovery of global demand. This positive trend continued into 2022, albeit at a more moderate growth rate of 5.5%, reaching a peak value of USD 13.77 billion, the highest level over the five years. However, in 2023, TTP exports declined by 15.5% due to weakening global demand and disruptions in raw material supply. These fluctuations indicate that Indonesia's textile sector is susceptible to international market conditions, raw material price volatility, and supply chain efficiency, thereby necessitating adaptive management strategies to maintain global competitiveness.

This fluctuation phenomenon is also reflected at the firm level. One company that illustrates such dynamics is Company X, an export agency operating primarily in the textile sector, alongside several other commodities such as solar batteries and madly French fries. Despite its diversified product portfolio, this study focuses exclusively on textile export activities, as this sector has long been the company's core business and presents complex operational challenges, including coordination with multiple suppliers, product quality issues, and delivery time constraints. These conditions reflect the realities faced by many small export agents in Indonesia, who operate with limited resources yet are required to meet the high standards and expectations of the global market. In contrast, the other two commodities remain relatively new within the company's export operations.

Indications of these operational constraints are evident in the increasing number of customer complaints the company has received. Based on internal complaint records at Company X, 43 complaints were recorded in 2023, primarily related to delivery delays, repeated shipping sample revisions, and product quality discrepancies. In 2024, the number of complaints increased to 57, exhibiting similar complaint patterns. This condition suggests that coordination complexity and the absence of formalized governance mechanisms potentially trigger delays, rework, and inefficiencies in order fulfillment processes.

Interestingly, despite structural limitations and limited digitalization, Company X has maintained positive financial performance. The company has continued to grow despite the absence of standardized operational processes and has even demonstrated increasing profitability over time. Profitability data for the period 2022-2025 are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Profitability Data of PT Karya Sejati Pesona for the Period 2022–2025

No	Year	Profit (IDR)
1	2022	2.544.133.040
2	2023	4.420.576.945
3	2024	4.895.476.326
4	2025	5.368.217.720

Based on Table 2, this condition presents an intriguing inconsistency: on the one hand, the company's operational efficiency remains weak due to the lack of standardized corporate governance; on the other hand, it continues to grow steadily in the export market. This indicates that strong interpersonal relationships have mainly supported the company's success, staff's practical experience, and the long-term development of high levels of trust among brokers, suppliers, and buyers. Although performance has thus far been sustained through personal working relationships, such an operational approach is not viable in the long run. As business activities expand or personnel changes occur, the risks of declining efficiency and operational accuracy increase significantly. Therefore, governance renewal is required to enhance work effectiveness and ensure that operational activities remain efficient, transparent, and accountable.

According to Saddiqa et al. (2023), cooperation governance is designed to reduce potential conflicts among stakeholders, ensure efficient service management, and maintain stability in customer–supplier relationships. Within the supply chain context, such governance serves not only as a legal instrument but also as a coordination mechanism that ensures compliance, role clarity, and the achievement of shared objectives. Accordingly, this theoretical perspective provides a conceptual foundation for improving work effectiveness through role regulation, performance standardization, and more systematic coordination among business partners.

Recent empirical studies further reinforce the importance of digitalization in enhancing organizational efficiency and competitiveness. Zainurrafiqi dan Gazali (2024) demonstrate that digitalization in supply chains strengthens resilience and performance among MSMEs, particularly in manufacturing and export sectors. Similarly, Handijaya et al. (2024) emphasize that digital transformation and process integration are essential strategies for addressing the uncertainty of global markets. Furthermore, Faturahman et al. (2025) find that digital systems improve efficiency through automation and data analytics. However, most existing studies focus on medium- to large-sized enterprises, while Research specifically examining small-scale export agents with limited human resources remains scarce.

In textile export activities, the effectiveness of export agents is critical for maintaining buyer trust and ensuring timely fulfillment in accordance with established quality standards. These conditions necessitate the implementation of planned, formal, and measurable governance mechanisms for cooperation.

As noted by Aslam dan Kusumastuti (2025), business governance functions as a mechanism for regulating business relationships through formal cooperation arrangements that define rights, obligations, and responsibilities among supply chain partners. Well-structured and systematic governance frameworks provide certainty for all parties, reduce conflict potential, and enhance operational efficiency. In the textile industry, where business relationships involve multiple actors such as raw material suppliers, garment manufacturers, and exporters, clear governance arrangements are essential to ensure effective and efficient coordination. Effective governance of cooperation clarifies responsibilities, mitigates risks, and enhances operational efficiency. Elements such as trust, commitment, and responsibility-sharing embedded within governance structures are critical for strengthening long-term coordination and collaboration among business partners. Structured governance mechanisms are therefore essential for managing multiple suppliers in parallel, ensuring synchronized production processes, and meeting buyer demands promptly.

Accordingly, this research is motivated by a significant gap between the increasing complexity of multi-supplier coordination demands and the operational conditions of export agents that lack formal cooperation governance and continue to rely on manual systems. This study aims to address this gap by identifying operational barriers that affect work effectiveness and by examining improvement strategies proposed by export agents based on their practical experience overcoming operational challenges, to enhance work effectiveness in alignment with actual field conditions.

The novelty of this study lies in its unique focus on the operational management of small-scale textile export agents with limited human resources, rather than large manufacturing firms or distributors. Based on these considerations, this research is entitled:

“Improving the Work Effectiveness of Textile Export Agents in Addressing Operational Barriers: A Qualitative Case Study”

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of work effectiveness in textile export agent operations. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to explore the meanings, experiences, and work dynamics of informants within their natural organizational context (Sugiyono, 2022). The research was conducted at a privately owned textile export company located in the Greater Jakarta area, Indonesia. The company’s identity was anonymized to maintain confidentiality and comply with research ethics. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with two key informants (I1 and I2) and triangulated with managerial and operational perspectives (T1 and T2), limited non-participant observation, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six stages proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006).

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to qualitative research ethics by obtaining informed consent from all participants. The identities of both the company and the informants were anonymized to protect confidentiality and prevent potential professional or reputational risks

3. Results and Discussion

Overview of the Research Object

This study examines Company X, a privately owned small-scale textile export agent operating in Indonesia. The company is located in the Greater Jakarta area, which provides strategic access to logistics infrastructure and a primary seaport, thereby supporting international export activities and shipment coordination.

Company X operates as an intermediary that connects overseas buyers with multiple local textile suppliers. Rather than allocating a single buyer’s order across several suppliers, the company manages multiple suppliers simultaneously to fulfill different buyer orders in parallel. This operational model requires intensive coordination, continuous communication, strict quality supervision, and effective order-tracking mechanisms to ensure timely delivery and compliance with buyer specifications.

Historically, Company X evolved from sourcing activities initiated by an overseas-affiliated textile trading company that began developing supplier networks in Indonesia in the early 2010s. These sourcing activities were initially facilitated through informal business relationships and gradually expanded as supplier capacity and buyer demand increased. In the early 2020s, the export coordination activities were formalized through the establishment of Company X as a legal business entity in Indonesia. For ethical and confidentiality reasons, the identities of affiliated entities and individuals are anonymized in this study.

As a small-scale export agent with limited human resources, Company X focuses on coordinating end-to-end export processes, including order confirmation, sample submission and approval, production monitoring, delivery scheduling, export documentation management, and financial flow administration such as deposit handling, final settlements, and commission processing. Daily operational coordination is primarily conducted through commonly used digital communication tools to ensure responsiveness, while email is used for formal correspondence and documentation.

The operational structure consists of a limited number of key roles: a marketing function responsible for buyer–supplier coordination and order follow-up; an accounting function responsible for financial management and export documentation; and executive leadership, which serves as the final decision-maker in high-risk or escalation cases. Although several operational processes remain largely manual, the company has sustained its export

activities through accumulated experiential knowledge and long-standing trust-based relationships with buyers and suppliers.

This organizational context provides the foundation for understanding the operational barriers faced by textile export agents and the improvement strategies identified in this study to enhance work effectiveness.

The findings of this study were obtained through in-depth interviews conducted by the researcher with selected informants who met predetermined criteria. The study focuses on two primary informants who are considered representative of the research object, particularly within the context of small-scale textile export agency operations involving parallel multi-supplier coordination and financial risk management. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, as they were deemed to possess relevant experience, knowledge, and direct involvement aligned with the Research objectives. Detailed information regarding the criteria for the primary informants is presented in Table 1.

Table 3 Criteria for Key Informants

No	Informant Code	Position	Description
1	I1	Marketing Manager	Responsible for buyer-supplier coordination, order follow-up, sample approval control, and handling quality and delivery complaints for over 11 years.
2	I2	Accounting Manager	Responsible for financial flow management, export documentation, commission, and deposit processing every 10 years.

Their roles as key operational executors make their work experiences highly relevant to the study's objective: understanding how operational barriers affect work effectiveness and identifying improvement strategies emerging from field practice. In-depth interviews were conducted to address the Research questions formulated by the researcher, namely:

1. What operational barriers affect the work effectiveness of textile export agents?
2. What improvement strategies, based on informants' experiences, can enhance work effectiveness?

The researcher developed an interview guideline aligned with these Research questions to ensure the collection of authentic, meaningful, and thematically relevant data.

Based on the data obtained from in-depth interviews with the primary informants, additional interviews were conducted with triangulation informants to verify specific findings, particularly those related to leadership aspects, and to ensure that the data were valid and reflective of actual field conditions. Information regarding the triangulation informants used in this study is presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Triangulated Informant Data Sources

No	Informant Code	Position	Description
1	T1	Managing Director	Strategic decision-maker with over 30 years of experience in the textile industry
2	T2	Marketing Staff	Operational executor with five years of experience in daily coordination activities.

Source triangulation was employed to ensure consistency in the researcher's interpretation of leadership-related findings derived from the primary informants.

The interview results were subsequently subjected to data reduction through tabulation, as presented in Table 5.

Table 5 Tabulation of Interview Results

No	Research Question	Category	Interview Question	Kutipan	Code
1	Operational barriers affecting work effectiveness	Quality inconsistency and repeated sample revisions	What is your experience with quality problems from suppliers?	"The quality is often unsatisfactory, especially the color, which tends to fade. Suppliers attempt several revisions, but the problem frequently persists."	I1
		Production and delivery delays	What are the main obstacles in delivery scheduling?	Delays are the main issue. Repeated revisions automatically push back delivery schedules sometimes by two to three months."	I1
		Weak contractual governance	How are contracts with suppliers and buyers managed?	"There are no penalties stated in the contract. They are mostly procedural and do not include sanctions. Sales contracts usually have an expiration period of around three months."	I1
		Fragile coordinations and communication	How is coordination with buyers and suppliers conducted?	"Color and lab-dip coordination is done only via email and messaging applications, while actual results often differ. Urgent instructions are sent informally, leading suppliers to underestimate their importance."	I1
		Psychological pressure in the intermediary role	How do you experience pressure when mediating between buyers and suppliers?	"I often feel powerless. My role is to act as a bridge that must not break. The emotional pressure can be exhausting and even affect sleep."	I1
2	Proposed improvement strategies to enhance work effectiveness	Strengthening contracts and sanctions	What improvements are needed in contractual arrangements?	"There should be buffer time and written contracts. Delays should be subject to penalties, and both new and regular buyers should provide a minimum 20%."	I1
		Adoption of IT and digital systems	What solutions are proposed to reduce manual processes?	"At minimum, there should be a simple integrated database instead of relying on	I2

				spreadsheets, allowing deposits, payments, and settlements to be monitored in real time.”	
		Enhancing supplier capacity and quality control	What strategies can stabilize product quality?	“supplier capacity must be increased, including investing in new machinery and conducting additional quality inspections before shipment.”	I1
		Leadership contribution	How does leadership contribute to handling operational challenges?	"Leadership is directly involved in decision-making and consistently motivates the team to find alternative solutions when problems arise."	I1, I2

This study employs thematic analysis based on interview tabulation to identify consistent patterns of operational barriers and proposed improvements derived from informants' narratives. The analytical process was conducted inductively following the stages proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006), beginning with repeated transcript readings, manual coding, and the subsequent grouping of codes into overarching themes. The tabulation process facilitated thematic mapping and demonstrated that informants' experiences formed collective meaning patterns related to the work effectiveness of textile export agents. The analysis was not merely descriptive but also reflective, taking into account the context of multi-supplier operations, financial risks, and relational dynamics. The resulting themes represent an integrated system encompassing operational barriers, improvement strategies, and the role of leadership within export agency operations. Visualization of findings using NVivo tools, including word clouds, project maps, hierarchy charts, cluster analysis, and concept maps, enhanced understanding of inter-theme relationships. The word cloud revealed the dominance of terms reflecting urgent needs for change, system weaknesses, and strong relational dependence on buyers and suppliers. Project maps and hierarchy charts demonstrated that production and delivery delays constituted the most dominant barriers, closely linked to quality revisions, fragile communication, and the agent's role-related pressure as an intermediary. Meanwhile, cluster analysis and concept maps confirmed that improvement strategies such as digitalization and contract strengthening emerged as direct responses to structural and recurring barriers.

The discussion results indicate that operational barriers faced by export agents are integrated and mutually reinforcing. Product quality mismatches trigger repeated revisions, leading to production and delivery delays, exacerbated by weak contractual governance and predominantly manual coordination systems. These conditions place export agents in a vulnerable position, both operationally and psychologically, as they must function as intermediaries between buyers and suppliers. Emotional pressures, including anxiety and mental fatigue, emerge as downstream consequences of reactive and informal work systems. Thus, the effectiveness of export agents is influenced not only by technical factors but also by support systems and the relational burdens inherent to the job role.

In response to these barriers, the study identifies three primary improvement strategies: strengthening contracts and sanctions, adopting IT/digital systems, and enhancing supplier capacity and quality control. These strategies are practical and grounded in informants' empirical experiences, aiming to transform informal work patterns into more structured, preventive approaches. Leadership serves as a critical buffer against system limitations through emotional support, data-driven decision-making, and collaborative practices. Overall, the study concludes that improving the effectiveness of textile export agents can be achieved through practical, integrated, and consistent operational governance improvements without necessitating significant structural organizational changes.

4. Conclusion

Based on qualitative data analysis from in-depth interviews, source triangulation, limited observation, document review, and NVivo-generated analytical visualizations, this study demonstrates that the work effectiveness of export agents at Company X remains influenced by systemic, interrelated operational constraints. These

constraints are not limited to technical aspects of export execution but also encompass weaknesses in contractual governance, limitations in coordination and communication systems, and the complexity of the agent's role as an intermediary between buyers and suppliers. Such conditions negatively affect the quality, speed, reliability, flexibility, and efficiency of export agents' work performance. However, the company has been able to sustain profitability growth, which in practice relies heavily on the empirical experience and personal relationships of operational actors. Furthermore, this study emphasizes that efforts to enhance the effectiveness of export agents' work require structured, context-specific improvements that emerge from informants' direct experiences. These improvement strategies include strengthening contractual governance, adopting simple digitalization initiatives to support coordination and data management, and enhancing supplier capacity and quality control. The implementation of these strategies is significantly influenced by leadership, which serves as a supporting factor that moderates the change process through data-driven decision-making and emotional support, thereby enabling sustainable improvements in the effectiveness of export agents' work.

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