There is no longer any doubt that technological progress in multiple fields have drastically changed our lifestyles. This phenomenon has been reinforced since last year with the Covid-19 crisis, having consequences the development of home-offices, the restrictions on the movement of persons, increasing online purchases which has further accelerated the digital transformation. As a consequence, it is more than necessary to rethink product labelling and open up the use of digitisation to provide mandatory product information.

Today, the main constraint is that even if product regulations are evolving, leaving sometimes the door open for digitisation of product information, ambiguity, unpredictability and lack of harmonization remains between regulations.

1 Digitisation is the process of converting information from a physical format into a digital one.
2 Digitisation of product information – the solution to break down protectionism’s barriers by Juliette Barenne and Romain Codron

Decathlon was founded in 1976 in France and is now present in more than 60 countries. Decathlon’s main mission is to sustainably make the pleasure and benefits of sport accessible to the many, by designing and manufacturing innovative, quality performing sports products at the best prices, for more than 80 sports. Decathlon is always exploring and researching to ensure sports experience for end-users is constantly improving and moving in a sustainable way.

Birth of the Taskforce
A few years ago, international sports manufacturers, brands and retailers agreed that some of the information on and with their sporting goods could be digitized. They rightly imagined that digitisation could be a solution for a global economy that would open up the market. They were even convinced that their consumers could have access to safer products with up-to-date information. It was a short step from their thinking to the launch of a working group hosted by the WFSGI. The first exchanges took place in January 2020 and less than 6 months later, in July 2020, a task force was launched dedicated to the digitalisation of product information, co-chaired by VF Corporation and Decathlon. An article in the WFSGI magazine 2020 already illustrated the challenges of dematerialisation. Let’s go back to the findings and the problems encountered in the digital age and the advent of online platforms.
Let’s start with encouraging progress, in July 2020, the European Commission published a draft of the revised « Blue Guide on the implementation of EU product rules » which established that «Unless otherwise provided for in specific legislation, whilst the safety information needs to be provided on paper, it is not required that all the set of instructions is also provided on paper but they can also be provided in an easily accessible manner through a website, electronic label, QR code, prompting the end-user to read on a webpage or download the full documentation in the language of their choice, or another electronic format»³. This wording is interesting because up to now, most product regulations do not specify a particular medium through which product information should be provided, only requesting the information to be communicated durably, leaving room for interpretation.

More recently, the European Commission has published a proposal for a regulation on machinery products which stated that « The instructions may be provided in a digital format. However, upon purchaser’s request at the time of the purchase of the machinery product, the instructions shall be provided in paper format free of charge »⁴. By opening the possibility to communicate the instructions in a digital format, European Union’s legislative bodies pointed out their wishes to push forward digital technologies to provide product information when it’s possible and does not affect consumer safety.

Digitisation of product information has also been discussed as part of the transition for a more sustainable economy, which brings out the idea of a digital product passport which « would encompass product-specific key information in digital form about the materials and substances content of the product, as well as information about key attributes regarding product sustainability and circularity. This information can be accessed via a suitable digital application »⁵. Indeed, the European Green Deal⁶ and the New Circular Economy Action Plan underlines the fact that digital technologies and digitisation of product information could provide many opportunities to help the consumer to make sustainable choices by providing reliable and up-to-date information on the product.

Though, these legislative initiatives on digitisation of product information are today at the project stage and retailers are constrained to provide mandatory product information if they want to play safe until regulations evolve.

The Task Force
The working group’s discussions focus on the opportunities and challenges of a digital shift in the communication of product information.

To move the line on digitisation of mandatory product information, the task force is looking at solutions that would permit digitizing product information to consumers, ensuring that all consumers, including the ones without access to the internet, will be informed and will have optimal access to the essential product information. Various technologies are considered as QR codes, URL, RFID, printing at the point of sales and others to ensure equal accessibility to mandatory product information.

The sporting goods industry is convinced by the benefit for consumers of e-labelling. Indeed, digitisation will improve the information provided to the customer by giving more detailed data. Then, it will reinforce the durability of the access to product information while most of the time, printed labels as packaging, manuals, or tags are cut or thrown away. The task force recommends having an approach that preserves the safety of consumers and defines which product information could be digitized and which product information, for product safety reasons, must remain in physical format on the product or its packaging, to call the immediate attention of the user.

³ Draft revised « Blue Guide » on the implementation of EU product rules of July 2020 - point 3.1
⁴ Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on machinery products of 21st of April 2021 – point 17.4
⁵ Council of the European Union conclusions of the 18th of December 2017 on Eco-innovation: enabling the transition towards a circular economy
⁶ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European economic and social committee and the committee of the regions – The European Green Deal – 11th of December 2019.
Next Steps
The Working group hosted by the WFSGI is a perfect example of strong cooperation between international sports manufacturers, brands and retailers. And the first achievement is the WFSGI statement on digitization of product information. The position statement, whose purpose is to lobby and advance digitization in countries where digitization of product information is not yet on the radar, or not allowed in the regulations (as the USA, China, EU etc..) is available by QR code at the end of the article.

Without revealing the exact contents of the document, the Working Group is convinced that the future with fewer labels will benefit the market.

For end-users, it enables them to durably access essential information. For the regulatory and control authorities, it eases the analysis of legal compliance. For the planet, it reduces material and resource usage.

In the near future, standardization at the international level (ISO) will be a strong tool to quickly offer digitized solutions. Indeed, the bicycle sector is also thinking about what could be the future of bicycle information for consumers.

More globally, following the positive coming legislative developments (even if it’s regrettable that the new changes on Directive 2001/95/EC8 on general product safety forget to refer to digitization), the Working Group will start calling the authorities from some countries to open discussions on digitization.