



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT MAY 1998

Starting Off

SUMMARY

Starting Off is based in Northampton. It offers training in business administration and customer service. Training is well planned, with the quality of instruction high. The company's support for trainees and approach to equal opportunities is good. The management of training is satisfactory, with robust quality assurance arrangements.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Business administration	2
Retailing & customer service	2

GENERIC AREAS	GRADE
Equal opportunities	2
Trainee support	2
Management of training	3
Quality assurance	2

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ key skills integrated with vocational learning and delivered effectively
- ◆ additional training courses offered to trainees at the provider's expense
- ◆ trainee reviews continuously inform individual learning programmes
- ◆ excellent support materials and open-learning workbooks
- ◆ out-of-hours training and support sessions
- ◆ positive action to recruit people from minority ethnic groups
- ◆ continuous improvement demonstrated

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ prior learning not accredited for some trainees
- ◆ uneven understanding of assessment among trainees
- ◆ job-search programme not available to all trainees
- ◆ poor co-ordination between on- and off-the-job training
- ◆ quality assurance procedures not implemented by all staff

INTRODUCTION

1. Starting Off is a privately owned training company. It was formed in 1989. It operates in Northamptonshire and part of Cambridgeshire. The company started trading as an employment agency for 16 to 19 year olds and, for the last eight years, it has offered training in business administration. While the company still operates as a commercial employment agency for 16 to 21 year olds, about half of its work is now funded through contracts with Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise (CCTE) and Greater Peterborough Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise (CCTE). All the trainees at Starting Off are working towards national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 2 or 3, through youth training or modern apprenticeship programmes. There were 203 people training at the time of inspection in three training centres. Starting Off has 34 staff.

2. Unemployment in Northamptonshire as a whole is low at 3.6 per cent, but is higher in some parts of Peterborough at 6.3 per cent. The percentage of people from minority ethnic groups varies significantly in the areas in which the company works, from below one per cent to nine per cent. In 1997, the proportion of pupils leaving school with five or more general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) grades A* to C was 40.5 per cent in Northamptonshire CCTE area and 42 per cent in the Peterborough CCTE area.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

3. Starting Off produced its first self-assessment report two months before the inspection. Self-assessment was new to the company. Some of the judgements made by the company were insufficiently critical but, in the main, the company approached self-assessment objectively and achieved a realistic evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses. Inspectors were able to confirm many of the grades awarded as a result of self-assessment. Inspectors found a number of important weaknesses in the management of training which were either understated or not included in the self-assessment report, such as poor co-ordination between on- and off-the-job training.

4. A team of three inspectors spent a total of nine days at Starting Off during May 1998. Inspectors examined company and awarding body documents. They met staff from the company, representatives of one CCTE and employers and trainees from both of the CCTE areas in which the company has contracts. Inspectors visited the premises of nine employers and one subcontractor, and interviewed or observed a total of 30 trainees as they were learning. They examined assessment records, trainees' work and portfolios of assessment evidence.

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Business administration

Grade 2

5. There are 161 trainees on business administration and accountancy training programmes in three training centres. They are undertaking NVQs at level 2 and modern apprenticeships leading to NVQ level 3. The majority of trainees join the provider's eight-week intensive training course at one of the centres, during which time they find or are placed in employment. They continue their programmes on a day-release basis. Eighty-five per cent of trainees are in employment. At the Northampton centre, training is provided by a subcontractor, in which the provider holds a commercial interest. At the Kettering and Peterborough centres, the provider delivers the training. While inspectors found additional strengths and weaknesses which were not identified in the self-assessment report, they were able to endorse the grade reached by the provider.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ intensive eight-week course can be completed flexibly
- ◆ real office tasks develop trainees' competencies and confidence
- ◆ trainees work at their own pace with assistance available
- ◆ key skills are integrated carefully
- ◆ additional training is available where it is needed

- ◆ trainees' work shows a high level of occupational competence
- ◆ trainees' success rates are good
- ◆ relationships with local employers are excellent

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ trainees' portfolios normally kept by the provider
- ◆ assessment planning does not involve trainee or employer
- ◆ some trainees' prior learning is not accredited

6. Inspectors observed very effective off-the-job training sessions as part of the eight-week intensive course. In these sessions, staff integrated theory and practice well. At all the centres, trainees are given real office work to do, such as answering the telephone, reception duties, faxing, filing and franking the post. Trainees' enjoyment on both the intensive and day-release programmes was apparent. Trainees' portfolios are well organised. Staff are capable and well trained and are registered assessors. They are proud of their achievements.

7. Placement of trainees in employment during their eight-week intensive courses is very well organised. A member of the provider's recruitment team visits all potential employers. A job description and person specification is written in consultation with the employer. During this process, the employer's commitment to training is evaluated. Trainees who meet the criteria of the person specification are invited to interview. Feedback on the recruitment process is sought from employers and trainees.

Retailing & customer service

Grade 2

8. Starting Off has 42 customer service trainees working towards NVQs at levels 2 and 3. Trainees are on either youth training or modern apprenticeship programmes. More than half the trainees complete the provider's intensive course in business administration at level 2 before transferring to customer service. Training is subcontracted. It takes the form of fortnightly group-training sessions at the provider's premises or on employers' premises. These sessions are supplemented with individual advice. While inspectors found additional strengths and weaknesses which were not identified in the self-assessment report, they were able to endorse the grade reached by the provider.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ trainees are set demanding goals
- ◆ off-the-job training is well structured
- ◆ trainees' attendance is carefully monitored
- ◆ trainee reviews inform individual learning programmes

- ◆ key skills training is comprehensive
- ◆ excellent support materials and open learning workbooks

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ staff are not trained to accredit prior learning
- ◆ some trainees do not understand assessment

9. Work placements are of a high standard. Employers are satisfied with the standard of trainees and the service they receive from Starting Off. Trainees are visited regularly in the workplace by training co-ordinators. Trainees feel that the training is closely related to their jobs and learning needs. Assessment is carried out regularly in the workplace, and it is both rigorous and fair. Assessment evidence is collected from a wide range of tasks, and trainees' portfolios are well organised. However, some trainees are not clear about the assessment process. Trainees who complete their business administration NVQ level 2 prior to the customer service qualification are not given any credit for their previous achievement in their individual training plans.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 2

10. Starting Off demonstrates a strong commitment to securing equality of opportunity. The company collects data relating to equal opportunities, analyses them carefully and takes action to address any anomalies. Staff engaged in recruitment are well trained and are required to sit a nationally recognised examination covering the legislation relating to equality of opportunity. The company's self-assessment was conducted carefully and was found to be accurate.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ recruitment targets for under-represented groups set and constantly exceeded
- ◆ statistics carefully monitored and evaluated
- ◆ positive action taken to recruit people from minority ethnic groups
- ◆ staff are well trained in equal opportunities legislation

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ access for disabled people in only some areas

11. The company provides all staff with a handbook which sets out their responsibilities for securing equal opportunities. The marketing department targets geographical areas which have significant numbers of under-represented groups and sends out marketing literature to every household. The company translates CCTE targets into objectives for its staff. Achievement of targets is monitored at management meetings. The provider has exceeded the targets set by the CCTE.

Trainee support

Grade 2

12. Starting Off is providing its trainees with the skills and knowledge which they need to find employment. Every trainee receives an induction at the training centre and the workplace. Trainees are sent questionnaires to check their satisfaction with induction. Once placed with an employer, trainees have access to regular off-the-job training. Those trainees who remain unplaced or unemployed receive a two-week job-search programme to suit their individual needs. This service may include delivering additional training, which is funded by the provider.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ trainees have regular access to trainers and assessors
- ◆ employers are kept well informed through regular contact with training co-ordinators
- ◆ trainees have regular reviews and are kept informed of their progress
- ◆ trainees' views are sought regularly to inform the steady improvement of support services

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ the job-search programme is not available to all trainees
- ◆ the results of initial assessment are not used consistently in the design of individual training plans

13. Trainees understand how to get advice and guidance, if they have problems. Some trainees find it difficult to attend the regular off-the-job training sessions, owing to their work commitments, but this problem has been overcome through the introduction of evening and Saturday morning sessions. Modern apprenticeship trainees and their employers receive a special presentation to explain in detail the level of commitment which is required of them. All programmes are evaluated regularly through the use of questionnaires which are issued to trainees and employers alike. Trainee reviews are carried out by training co-ordinators. Review involves both the trainee and the employer. Completed review documentation is circulated to trainers, assessors and recruiters to ensure that all staff are fully informed of trainees' progress and achievements.

Management of training

Grade 3

14. Management and staffing structures are clear and are fully understood by staff. Starting Off has committed itself to achieving the Investor in People standard. There is regular staff appraisal, development and review. All staff are fully involved in the business planning process and are proud of their achievements. Inspectors found a number of weaknesses which had not been identified by the company, and awarded a lower grade than had been proposed in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ business plan and targets understood and supported by all staff
- ◆ procedures are well documented for staff recruitment, induction, development and appraisal
- ◆ lines of accountability and communication are clear
- ◆ regular management meetings result in clear action plans
- ◆ the staff development programme is dedicated to improving training

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ poor co-ordination between on- and off-the-job training
- ◆ not all staff have access to, or fully understand, company policies
- ◆ staff are not trained to accredit prior learning

15. Starting Off has produced a business plan which is written in plain language. It sets clear and measurable performance targets across a range of activities. These targets are translated into individual staff goals which are agreed on and monitored at quarterly intervals. Regular meetings, involving all staff, are used to review progress against the business plan.

16. For the purposes of assessment, links between workplace supervisors and the provider's assessors are poor. Supervisors do not feel that they are sufficiently involved in assessment for NVQs. Trainees feel that they are overburdened with producing written work which is often unrelated to their practical training.

Quality assurance

Grade 2

17. Starting Off meets the quality standards of the two CCTEs with which it contracts, and the requirements of the awarding bodies. It regularly seeks feedback from trainees by way of questionnaires. It has a good reputation among employers and trainees for the quality of its provision. The inspection grade awarded was the same as that identified in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ quality policy manual issued to all offices
- ◆ management meetings always review quality of training
- ◆ plans are drawn up to address weaknesses
- ◆ quality assurance arrangements are understood and implemented by subcontractors
- ◆ continuous improvement is sought across a wide range of activities related to trainees

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ poor document control systems
- ◆ quality assurance not fully understood and implemented by all staff

18. Much work has been done to continuously improve the service provided by Starting Off. Trainees and employers are the focus of all its activities. Documentation is attractive and written in plain language, so that everybody understands clearly what is expected of them. There is a high level of consistency in the company's work in its three centres. The provider has consistently met every element of its contracts with one CCTE, resulting in maximum performance bonuses and the award of preferred supplier status.