



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT FEBRUARY 2000

IN-COMM Training Services Ltd

SUMMARY

In-Comm Training Services Ltd is a privately owned training company based in Aldridge, near Walsall. The company works in partnership with three engineering-group training associations in Birmingham and the West Midlands. The training in engineering and business administration is good. There are good levels of achievement of NVQ level 2 by engineering trainees. Employers for both engineering and business administration trainees provide a wide range of learning opportunities in the workplace. Good use is made of workplace evidence in trainees' portfolios. Systems used for tracking trainees' progress and providing appropriate support are good. There is good awareness of equal opportunities within In-Comm. The management of training and the comprehensive systems for quality assurance of the training are outstanding.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Engineering	2
Business administration	2

GENERIC AREAS	GRADE
Equal opportunities	2
Trainee support	2
Management of training	1
Quality assurance	1

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ good achievement rate of NVQs at level 2
- ◆ good work placements
- ◆ good system for tracking trainees' progress
- ◆ good identification of support needs following reviews
- ◆ good business planning, target setting and monitoring
- ◆ effective auditing of comprehensive quality assurance systems
- ◆ effective use of performance and data evaluation to monitor improvements

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient involvement of some employers in NVQ process
- ◆ no formal training plans in some workplaces
- ◆ inadequate initial assessment of basic skills

INTRODUCTION

1. In-Comm Training Services Ltd (In-Comm) is owned by its three directors. There is a managing director, a finance director and a sales director. It has 26 staff in total. The company is located in Aldridge and Birmingham and provides training services primarily in the Walsall and Birmingham area. The company also has commercial business and training links across the UK. In-Comm works in partnership with three group training associations (GTAs). The Birmingham, West Midlands and Wolverhampton-based GTAs combined represent the interests of over 50 companies throughout the West Midlands and Shropshire. The board of In-Comm comprises the three owners, plus the chairmen of each GTA acting in the role of non-executive directors.

2. In-Comm has a business-services sector and a training-services sector. The business-services sector provides training and consultancy to private companies in quality assurance, health and safety, and management, and advises those working towards the Investors in People Standard. The training services sector has been providing government-funded training programmes since 1982.

3. In-Comm Training Services has contracts with both Walsall and Birmingham Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs). In-Comm's Birmingham centre has focused on information-technology training for adults. During the last year, the company made significant reductions in the number of trainees at the Birmingham training centre. During February 2000, the Birmingham training centre was closed. In-Comm now has an administrative office in the Birmingham area. In-Comm has 137 trainees through Walsall TEC and 23 through Birmingham TEC. There are 117 trainees taking engineering and 40 trainees taking business administration. The remaining three trainees constituted too small a number for the occupational area of retailing to be inspected. In-Comm uses four local further education colleges as subcontractors for training in the theory of engineering, and training for 19 engineering trainees is subcontracted to their employer.

Breakdown of trainees by occupational area, age category and TEC

	Engineering		Business administration		Retailing		Total
	Youth	Adult	Youth	Adult	Youth	Adult	
Walsall TEC	100	1	28	8	0	0	137
Birmingham TEC	16	0	4	0	0	3	23
Total	116	1	32	8	0	3	160

4. Walsall has a population of 261,200. The Walsall economy, like other Black Country areas, is heavily dependent on the manufacturing sector. Employment in manufacturing accounts for approximately 36 per cent of all jobs in the area. This

figure is high compared with the Black Country's average of 26 per cent and the much lower national figure of 18 per cent. In Walsall, 63 per cent of manufacturing employment lies in three subsectors: fabricated metal products, basic metals, and miscellaneous machinery and equipment. Currently, the unemployment rate in Walsall is lower than in other local areas. The unemployment rate in Walsall is 5 per cent, whereas the rate in the West Midlands area is 5.7 per cent and in Birmingham, 6.7 per cent.

5. The proportion of the population from minority ethnic groups in the Walsall area at the time of the 1991 census was 9.1 per cent. This is relatively low in comparison to the West Midlands as a whole at 15 per cent and the neighbouring town of Wolverhampton at 18.6 per cent.

6. In 1999, the percentage of school leavers in Walsall achieving five or more general certificates of education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 36.1 per cent, compared with the national average of 47.9 per cent. Only 61 per cent of 16-year-olds continued in full-time education compared with the national figure of 69 per cent. The Walsall TEC area has 17 per cent of 16-year-olds progressing into government-funded training. This is significantly higher than the national proportion of 10 per cent.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

7. The self-assessment process has been a part of In-Comm's operating methods for more than 10 years. The reports are used to identify a continuous improvement strategy. The current report was completed in July 1999. The views of trainees, employers and staff were considered by the self-assessment team. A detailed analysis of trainees' retention, achievement and destinations was undertaken as part of the process. The report includes a comprehensive labour market overview for both the Walsall and Birmingham areas. A summary is provided for each aspect of training. The strengths and weaknesses are clearly identified. Each strength is supported by a paragraph of explanatory text. Inspectors agreed with most of the findings in the self-assessment report. Inspectors recognised that appropriate action plans made in July 1999 had been partially implemented and awarded higher grades for the generic areas.

8. A team of four inspectors spent a total of 14 days with In-Comm in late February 2000. The occupational areas of engineering and business administration were inspected. Inspectors interviewed 44 trainees and made 15 workplace visits. They met with 14 supervisors or employers. Eighteen interviews were conducted with In-Comm's staff, from both the training and business services sectors. Two interviews were conducted with subcontractors' staff. Nineteen trainees' files and 37 portfolios were examined. Other documents reviewed included contracts, external verifiers' reports, health and safety and equal opportunities policies, quality assurance procedures, minutes of meetings, promotional materials and files of management and quality assurance evidence. Inspectors observed and graded two training sessions at grade 2 and observed four assessments and three reviews.

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Engineering

Grade 2

9. There are 117 engineering trainees. In-Comm supports training at NVQ level 3 predominantly in mechanical-engineering production, engineering maintenance and technical services. Eighty-four trainees are modern apprentices planning to complete their modern apprenticeships within a four-year period. Eighteen of these are currently working towards NVQs at level 2 and the remainder towards level 3. There are eight national trainees who are working towards NVQs at level 2. There is one adult trainee doing a level 3 programme in mechanical maintenance. The remaining 24 trainees are on other work-based training for young people. Eight are working towards NVQs at level 2 and 16 towards NVQs at level 3. In-Comm currently uses 43 companies for on-the-job training. Trainees attend one of four subcontracted local colleges for day release vocational education courses such as national or higher national certificates, general NVQs (GNVQs) in engineering or other non-NVQ courses in engineering. In-Comm also subcontracts some on- and

off-the-job training and assessment to a large multi-national engineering company which is accredited by the awarding body to offer NVQs. Under this arrangement, there are 19 trainees, of whom six are doing their first-year foundation training in the company's training workshops supervised by three staff. This arrangement has been in place for six months. Initial training for all other trainees is carried out in In-Comm's engineering training centre. Trainees attend on a full-time basis over a 24-to 28-week period to undertake the NVQ level 2 foundation training in engineering manufacture. Modern apprentices obtain additional technical units at level 2 in accordance with the apprenticeship framework. The engineering-training centre at In-Comm is approved by the awarding body and has six appropriately qualified staff. They train and assess all trainees based at In-Comm towards NVQs and qualifications in key skills. After the initial training period, trainees progress to their workplace and commence level 3 training. Assessment at level 3 is done by In-Comm's staff during their frequent visits to the workplace. In-Comm's assessors monitor progress and undertake formal reviews.

10. The inspection team confirmed many of the strengths and weaknesses given in the self-assessment report. The grade awarded is the same as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good achievement rate for level 2 NVQs
- ◆ good work placements
- ◆ extensive use of workplace evidence
- ◆ good understanding of NVQ process by trainees
- ◆ strong focus on key skills for first- and second-year trainees

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ delayed assessment of key skills for third- and fourth-year trainees
- ◆ insufficient involvement of some employers in NVQ process

11. During the three-year period from 1996 to 1999, an average of 89 per cent of trainees gained the level 2 engineering-foundation award. The foundation training is well structured. It is given and assessed by highly competent staff in the training centre. Trainees express satisfaction with the programme and are proud of the skills they develop. Of the trainees who started in autumn 1996, 36 progressed to level 3 training in the workplace. Ten of these 36 trainees have completed their apprenticeship programme within three and a half years. Six trainees left training on completion of the level 3 award. The remaining 20 trainees are still in training. Of these, 13 have completed their level 3 portfolios and are currently working on key skills evidence.

12. Most trainees are employed at engineering firms which manufacture engineering products or offer engineering services on a commercial basis.

GOOD PRACTICE

In one firm, four trainees worked as a team to produce a comprehensive induction pack for visitors and new employees to a particular section within the factory. They produced overhead transparencies which included digital photographs, and incorporated these into the presentation pack. They made a presentation to senior staff. In addition to producing a viable resource, this activity also produced evidence for their key skills qualification.

Employers offer a range of training opportunities on commercial production machinery and equipment. In most cases, training offered by employers is more than adequate to meet the demands of NVQ level 3 programmes. Where the range of evidence cannot be met in a specific area, trainees are temporarily transferred to another engineering company to gain competence.

13. In-Comm's assessors observe trainees in the workplace to assess their skills. Trainees are assessed on products manufactured in the workplace. Technical services trainees are assessed on technical drawings produced by using computer-aided drawing (CAD) software. Trainees produce good technical descriptions of the work they have undertaken. Evidence of trainees' competence in key skills and the NVQ is drawn from a wide range of workplace activities.

14. During the foundation training, trainees develop an understanding of how to produce a portfolio of evidence. Foundation trainees are guided through the process of cross-referencing their evidence to the NVQ units. During visits to the workplace, their assessor provides further guidance on identification of evidence at level 3. The trainees take responsibility for gathering valid evidence from the workplace, and for cross-referencing evidence to the level 3 units.

15. In late 1999, the foundation programme was re-designed to include the development and assessment of key skills. For example, numeracy skills are assessed while trainees calculate the cutting speeds on machine tools. Communication skills are assessed during group discussions. Key skills development takes place at the training centre one day a week. The programme includes sessions on the use of information technology equipment. There is also a committee meeting of trainees. At these weekly meetings, trainees discuss a range of issues relating to the first-year programme. The trainee with the responsibility for taking the minutes changes on a weekly basis. Trainees use this activity as key skills evidence. Trainees completing their foundation programme aim to complete key skills units at level 2 in communication, application of number and information technology. In one large engineering company, the second-year programme concentrates solely on the development and assessment of key skills in the workplace, but this delays progression to the level 3 NVQ. Third- and fourth-year trainees' training and assessment in key skills has been delayed. They are now collecting key skills evidence as evidence separate and additional to the NVQ. Trainees have chosen to finish their level 3 NVQs or their formal vocational education course before starting collection of key skills evidence. Out of 18 modern apprentices who have completed their NVQ at level 3, eight have yet to complete their key skills work. This has delayed the completion of the apprenticeship framework.

16. There are good working relationships between In-Comm and the engineering employers. Many of the employers have benefited from training at In-Comm. Some employers' staff have been promoted to management posts following apprenticeship training with In-Comm. These employers are fully involved in the training process and support their trainees effectively. However, there are some

employers who are not sufficiently involved in the training process. Target setting for NVQ achievement is predominantly led by visiting assessors with trainees. In those cases where there has been slow progress, employers' staff have not been involved in agreeing targets for achievement. They rely on trainees and assessors to plan the collection of portfolio evidence. Some workplace supervisors lack information on the structure and content of the apprenticeship framework. In some cases, supervisors are not present during the whole of the trainees' review process. In-Comm has devised a short NVQ familiarity course for workplace supervisors. However, the number of workplace supervisors who have attended this course has been disappointing.

Business administration

Grade 2

17. In-Comm provides training in business administration NVQs for 40 trainees. Thirty-two trainees are on administration programmes, eight of whom are modern apprentices, eight are national trainees and 16 are on other work-based training programmes for young people. There are eight adult trainees taking information technology on a training-for-work programme. Administration training is given in the workplace and 74 per cent of trainees are employed. The remaining trainees are in work placements. In-Comm provides additional training and support to meet individual trainees' needs. Assessment is done in the workplace by In-Comm's three assessors. In information technology, the adult trainees undertake initial training at the In-Comm training centre prior to their work placements. The number of information technology trainees has significantly reduced during the last year.

18. The intake of trainees in 1997 and 1998 included 16 modern apprentices in administration. Three trainees have since completed their apprenticeship plan, four others left training on completion of the NVQ at level 3, three left after completing level 2, four remain in training and two left without any qualifications. Ten national trainees started in 1999. Eight remain in training and two have left without any qualifications. Since 1996, a total of 86 youth trainees have started training. Of these, 27 completed their individual training plans, three left with some qualifications, 40 left without any qualifications and 16 remain in training. Approximately 60 of the youth trainees progressed into jobs. Since 1996, a total of 253 adult trainees have started training. Of these, 88 completed their training plans, 114 left with some qualifications, 43 left without any qualifications and eight remain in training. Approximately 40 of the adult trainees progressed into jobs. The self-assessment report identified most of the strengths also found by inspectors. Inspectors found a further weakness, but awarded the same grade as that given in the report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good work placements
- ◆ well-supported trainees motivated to progress

- ◆ extensive range of workplace evidence in portfolios
- ◆ full understanding of NVQ process by trainees

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ delayed unit assessment for some trainees
- ◆ no formal training plan in some workplaces

19. Most local employers are small to medium-sized businesses. Workplaces provide a varied learning environment and ample opportunities for evidence collection and assessment. Some employers give trainees opportunities to undertake different job roles within the firm to broaden the training experience. Good support is given to trainees in the workplace and most employers are supportive of trainees' programmes. One employer produces a personal development plan for its trainees every three months to ensure it is meeting the training and development needs of the trainees.

20. Trainees find staff very approachable and the working relationship between trainees and assessors is particularly good. Trainees have a good rapport with their work-based supervisors. In-Comm offers additional training in telephone techniques and equal opportunities to trainees who may benefit. Employers are encouraged to offer employment to trainees on or soon after commencement of training. Trainees are encouraged to progress to higher-level qualifications. Assessors discuss the work role of trainees with workplace supervisors and decide if it is appropriate for the trainees to progress to an NVQ at level 3. Progress reviews are carried out regularly and targets for achievement and guidance on producing evidence are an integral part of the review process. Trainees are able to attend In-Comm for extra advice and support with key skills or portfolio development. Information technology facilities are available at these times for trainees' use. Formal training in information technology at the In-Comm training centre takes place in small groups or on a one-to-one basis to ensure individual needs are met.

21. Trainees make use of a wide range of work-based evidence to build portfolios of a good standard. Opportunities for obtaining key skills evidence are readily available. Key skills have started to be integrated into the administration NVQs. Assessors provide good guidance to trainees on the type of evidence to be used in the portfolio. The business administration team holds regular meetings to discuss procedures and trainees' progress. Workplace supervisors are encouraged to attend an In-Comm workshop aimed at providing more effective support to trainees. Five workplace supervisors attended the recent workshop.

22. The assessment of individual units is delayed for some trainees. Trainees are given good guidance on producing a range of work-based evidence. Trainees assemble evidence but assessors do not always take opportunities on their visits to formally assess this evidence in the workplace. Reviews focus on assessing documentary evidence and on the production of evidence for other NVQ units.

23. Training in the workplace for some trainees is not planned to the requirements of the NVQ. Some workplaces do not have a formal training plan for trainees. In-Comm has an action plan to assist employers in the development of in-house training plans.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 2

24. In-Comm has equal opportunities policy and procedures which are subject to an annual review. The managing director holds responsibility for equal opportunities. The daily implementation of equal opportunities is delegated to an equal opportunities co-ordinator. One of the tutor/assessors in business administration has held the post of equal opportunities co-ordinator for the last 18 months. In-Comm checks the equal opportunities policies of companies before accepting trainees from their employees or using companies as work placements. It issues its own policy to any company without a policy of its own. Trainees receive information on equal opportunities, discrimination and the complaints procedure during their induction programme. Currently, there are three women out of a total of 117 engineering trainees and 10 men out of a total of 40 business administration trainees. There are four trainees from minority ethnic groups. Seven trainees have declared a disability. Inspectors confirmed many of the strengths and weaknesses identified in In-Comm's self-assessment report. They recognised the progress that has been made since the last self-assessment process was undertaken and awarded a higher grade than that given by the company.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effective promotion and management of equality of opportunity
- ◆ good staff training on equal opportunities issues
- ◆ good links with external agencies

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient monitoring of equal opportunities in the workplace

GOOD PRACTICE

The documents given to trainees during their induction programme make reference to all of the relevant legislation and give examples to clarify the meaning of direct and indirect discrimination.

25. The management and promotion of equal opportunities is given a high profile within the training company. The managing director works closely with the equal opportunities co-ordinator in planning strategies to improve the company's overall performance. The managing director is involved in a number of activities aimed at improving representation of under-represented groups. Current action planning is a direct result of the self-assessment undertaken in July 1999. All staff have been informed of current statistical data on equal opportunities. The equal opportunities

co-ordinator brings several years of relevant experience to the post and displays significant enthusiasm for the objectives set by managers. In particular, the need to increase access to training for people with disabilities has been recognised. The company's new information technology training suite is located on the ground floor and the reception area has been relocated to provide space for a training room adjacent to the main entrance. There is a managed process of sending equal opportunities information packs to employers and work-placement companies.

26. Posters, pictures and notice boards in the training centre display a wide range of aspects related to equality of opportunity. Display material clearly explains the meaning of terms such as harassment. Staff and trainees' notice boards display the complaints procedure.

27. The company's management team has undertaken surveys of staff's understanding of equal opportunities. The results of these surveys have been used to assist in identification of staff training programmes. The staff directly involved in training, assessment and trainees' reviews have undertaken at least one awareness-training session in the last six months. The most recent event, in late January 2000, involved a presentation from a representative of the Commission for Racial Equality. The company's internal equal opportunities guidelines to staff are structured around all stages of the training process, from recruitment to final verification of awards. Reference is made to a series of good and poor practice examples in the trainees' recruitment and selection process.

28. In-Comm has established good links with a variety of external agencies. The management team promotes opportunities for work-based training through these established links. The company's promotional materials identify that In-Comm will consider all applicants to training. The equal opportunities co-ordinator is working with the local education business partnership in promoting work-based training to young, disadvantaged school pupils. Recently, two young women employed by In-Comm, both modern apprentices in business administration, represented the company at a local school. Female employees and trainees are keenly involved in regional events to attract more women into engineering. The company has established an effective working relationship with the equal opportunities officer in the local TEC who helps the company with audits of equal opportunities. Resources for staff and trainees with disabilities have been obtained through links with a local specialist company.

29. In-Comm has set targets to achieve an overall increase in the number of trainees from minority ethnic groups, to reduce gender imbalances in the two main occupational sectors and to widen participation for people with disabilities. Part of the company's strategy has been to ensure that referral agencies are aware of the targets. However, the training company is not yet reaching its target of 12 per cent of trainees being from minority ethnic groups. The minority ethnic population in the local district is 9.6 per cent. Currently, the representation among the trainees is only 2.5 per cent. Participation of women in engineering is only 2.6 per cent against a target of 8 per cent. Trainees with disabilities represent 4.4 per cent of the total

against a target of 10 per cent. The measures put in place to try to reach the targets are relatively new, some less than nine months in practice, so their effects have not yet been noticed. They are too new to evaluate.

30. Some employers and work-placement companies are not fully aware of their responsibility to ensure equality of opportunity for trainees. Some employers do not openly promote equal opportunities in the workplace. Trainees in the workplace have a basic understanding of equality of opportunity. This understanding has not been systematically reinforced since induction. In late January 2000, a modification was made to the trainees' review documents to include a check on equality of opportunity in the workplace. This change has not yet been reinforced by clear guidelines for staff undertaking reviews. The managing director does include equal opportunities issues in training sessions offered to work-based supervisors and mentors.

Trainee support

Grade 2

31. Applicants to In-Comm undertake an interview and an initial assessment. Following selection of their qualification aim, trainees have an induction to their training programme. Further induction is given when the trainee enters the work-placement company. An occupationally competent member of In-Comm's training staff visits each trainee in the workplace on a monthly basis. These scheduled visits provide an opportunity for work-based assessment and a formal progress review. Trainees can request further advice by telephone and ask for assessments if a particular work activity appropriate to assessment is being undertaken. Inspectors agreed with many of the strengths given in the self-assessment report. The weaknesses stated in the self-assessment report were more appropriate to other areas. Inspectors identified two other weaknesses. The grade awarded by inspectors is higher than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effective review process
- ◆ good identification of support needs following reviews
- ◆ good range of suitable employers
- ◆ good access to learning resources
- ◆ celebration of trainees' achievements
- ◆ impartial advice given to potential trainees

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ inadequate initial assessment of basic skills
- ◆ no specialist support for numeracy

32. The results of the trainees' review process are well recorded. Trainees and workplace supervisors receive a copy of the completed review form. The progress towards each NVQ unit is identified in terms of percentage completion. During monthly visits to trainees in the workplace, In-Comm's assessors undertake assessment and complete an assessment record and assessment plan. The assessment plan identifies the type of evidence and the mode of assessment for the next visit. The assessment record is used to inform bar charts displaying trainees' progress in each NVQ and key skills unit. These charts are updated monthly. The chart compares the actual progress of a trainee with that required to complete the NVQ or key skills unit within a target timescale. Trainees and In-Comm's assessors use these charts to determine the percentage completion each trainee is making towards the NVQ and to measure progress since the last review. Trainees and supervisors appreciate this approach as it produces a figure which demonstrates that progress is being made. The managing director of In-Comm reviews this activity monthly for every trainee.

33. Using the data from the review process, the training manager makes a decision on the degree of support required to enable a trainee to maintain or hasten progress towards the qualification. The workplace assessor provides this support. Additional visits are arranged to ensure that agreed targets are met by pre-determined dates. This often results in weekly support and assessment visits to a trainee.

34. In many cases, potential trainees are referred to In-Comm by the careers service. After a preliminary interview and key skills test, potential trainees are sent to prospective employers who have expressed an interest in employing a trainee. Many employers view In-Comm as an extension to their own personnel department. Recently, there has been a TEC-led initiative to put unemployed trainees onto modern apprentices' programmes. This has produced a demand for trainees to be permanently employed rather than on work placements to fulfil the apprenticeships. At present, more than 98 per cent of In-Comm's trainees are employed.

35. On application to In-Comm, all trainees undergo an interview prior to commencing training to determine their suitability for employment. Details regarding the individual are then circulated to local employers who have expressed an interest in employing a trainee. Employers make the final decision regarding employment. Once a trainee is selected by an employer, training is undertaken at In-Comm's training centre. On the first day at the training centre, trainees undergo a comprehensive induction. At the end of the induction programme, the engineering trainees complete a questionnaire to demonstrate their understanding of the induction. These trainees undergo mini-inductions as they enter the various training sections. Trainees also have work-based induction sessions. Business administration trainees have an induction programme followed by two to four weeks of initial training at In-Comm's training centre before transferring to the workplace.

36. In addition to the normal working day, In-Comm is open to trainees in the evening for at least three evenings a week and on a Saturday morning. They use

this time to access computers and consult In-Comm's staff. One training room has nine new computers of commercial standard. Trainees use these sessions for computer training, for key skills support and general advice. Some trainees also attend In-Comm's training centre during the normal working day with the consent of their employers. There are instances when trainees have been allowed to take a computer home to complete their work.

37. In-Comm recognises and celebrates trainees' achievements. Each year it hosts an open evening to which parents, employers, Walsall TEC and local press representatives are invited. The presentations include awards to 'youth trainee of the year' and 'adult trainee of the year'. Both are presented with a shield and a cheque. Achievement is reported, along with photographs, in the local paper.

38. When trainees apply to In-Comm, they receive an initial appraisal interview. If, at this stage, it becomes apparent In-Comm cannot provide a programme suitable for a particular trainee, then that trainee is directed towards another training company. This guidance is also given to trainees leaving training at In-Comm. The careers service is notified of the action taken to enable it to keep track of each particular trainee.

39. In-Comm considers all applicants to training. During the initial assessment, trainees' basic skills in literacy and numeracy are not systematically assessed. In-Comm is in consultation with the basic skills agency to rectify this situation. However, modern apprentices do take key skills assessment tests to establish the level at which each trainee is competent in each key skill. Some have additional learning needs identified by these tests. The individual training plans for a few trainees state that additional training in numeracy is required. At present, the specialist support for these trainees is unsatisfactory, being given in 'mathematics' rather than in basic numeracy. Following the reduction in the number of trainees at the Birmingham centre, a staff member with specialist qualifications and experience is about to be transferred to the Aldridge site to provide additional learning support.

Management of training

Grade 1

40. The three company directors are jointly responsible for all strategic business and operational aspects of the training. This senior management team meet formally on a monthly basis. The managing director chairs most of the key meetings within the organisation, including a minimum of two board meetings each year. The managing director is responsible for operations, staff development and appraisals. The company gained the Investors in People Standard in 1996 and was re-accredited in 1999. It is used as a framework for staff development and personnel procedures. Training is co-ordinated in two main ways. Training services has eight full-time staff. They train and assess trainees on modern apprenticeships, national traineeships and other work-based programmes. Business services has 10 staff who provide commercial training for companies and consultancy in engineering and quality-related areas. There are four staff who train in both areas, including the

internal verifiers for engineering and business administration. Although staff fall within one of these two main training areas, they also work within three sector teams, for engineering, business administration and management. All 26 staff attend the appropriate sector team meetings. Within work-based training, on- and off-the-job training is co-ordinated for trainees with In-Comm. Those trainees with the subcontracted training provider have their training co-ordinated by the subcontractor, and In-Comm monitors the quality of this. Trainees obtaining additional qualifications through the subcontracted colleges used work-based evidence in their college projects. Inspectors agreed with the strengths identified in the self-assessment report. The two identified weaknesses were closely linked and directly relevant to the occupational sectors. The grade awarded is higher than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good business planning, target setting and monitoring
- ◆ clear channels of communication with effective teamwork
- ◆ comprehensive appraisal and staff development
- ◆ effective use of performance and data evaluation to monitor training
- ◆ excellent management of health and safety
- ◆ careful matching of trainees to employers

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no service-level agreements with subcontracted colleges

41. Senior managers involve staff in the development of business plans. There is a clear planning process with published targets shared with all staff. In-Comm's staff benefit from being based at one main centre. Communication channels are both formal and informal. The weekly senior management meetings have regular input from individual staff. The sector team meetings have set agenda items covering awarding bodies' updates, interpretation of standards and standardisation of assessment practices. Also included is performance measured against contracted targets. When there are performance issues which relate to individual staff, these are noted at an early stage in the training cycle, so there is ample time for corrective action to be taken.

42. Managers are well informed of the progress of individual trainees by systematic analysis of the monthly updates to the trainees' tracking charts. Managers hold monthly contract reviews with team leaders. These are effective in providing the management team with a regular performance evaluation. Assessors' workloads are well managed. Only two assessment visits are recommended in a day so that ample time is spent with trainees at their workplaces.

43. A corporate update bulletin is produced normally three or four times each year. As well as celebrating trainees' achievements, staff development activity is

recorded. Contract performance tables are published in the bulletin with praise given where outcomes have been good. Dates are highlighted about planned events such as training for employers and supervisors. All staff are issued with a copy of a corporate information booklet detailing the corporate trends, policies and goals.

44. Staff responsibilities and reporting lines are clear. There is a formal organisation structure. Every member of staff has a personal profile summary which states their job role, qualifications and training, a record of relevant positions held and areas of specialisation. The staff appraisal process involves monthly feedback and collation of evidence regarding performance. All staff prepare for the six-monthly appraisal meetings by identifying their own strengths and weaknesses. These are discussed in meetings with the managing director and actions are agreed for the year. These include short- and long-term goals. All staff are encouraged to undertake training and development. This is recorded centrally so that an overview of the company's skills base through its staff is available. Attendance at any form of development training is logged so that the effectiveness of the company's training can be analysed. Staff find the self-appraisal process valuable and are motivated and keenly involved in the work of In-Comm.

45. The management information system is very well utilised to inform training decisions. In-Comm has consistently performed well on NVQ achievements in comparison to other local training providers. The systematic collection of performance data from a variety of sources has provided staff with objective-measurable targets to monitor improvements in qualification achievements.

46. Clear targets are also set for health and safety training. All relevant staff have full training and qualifications in health and safety. These staff conduct risk assessments at employers' premises before any company is used as a work placement. The managing director authorises the approval and decides on the frequency of re-audits by categorising the work placement based on its strengths and weaknesses. Use of a pro-forma for health and safety during visits to a trainee's workplace ensures an in-depth evaluation. All safety inspection checklists are recorded centrally and agreed actions followed through at audit. A specialist health and safety consultant employed within the company oversees all safety issues. Trainees carry out assignments for health and safety and In-Comm's staff relate the knowledge developed to actual working practices.

47. In-Comm takes care when choosing employers for trainees. It considers the aspirations and capabilities of the trainees and the location of the company to the trainee's home. In particular, it examines the choice of NVQ programmes against the range of learning opportunities in the workplace. All new employers are encouraged to send workplace supervisors on one of In-Comm's short courses aimed at improving their understanding of work-based qualifications.

48. In-Comm does not have a formal contractual arrangement with the local colleges which provide day-release off-the-job training for some of the engineering trainees. Employers receive termly progress reports on engineering trainees

attending college courses. Staff at the college attended by most of the trainees have invited employers and In-Comm's staff to attend course-review meetings. Trainees are encouraged to use work-based assignments and projects within their national and higher national certificate college work. In-Comm's assessors encourage trainees to cross-reference work which has been assessed at college to their key skills portfolios so that they do not need to repeat the collection of this evidence. The progress of trainees on college courses is monitored by In-Comm's staff during the formal review process.

Quality assurance

Grade 1

49. In-Comm has developed a quality-management system incorporating approved standards. The ISO 9000 quality standard has been used since 1994. All performance activities are set out in policies and procedures. The managing director is responsible for strategic development and operational effectiveness of the quality system. All staff are given identified responsibilities for quality assurance and they contribute to an annual review of the policies and procedures. All sector team members have been involved in formulating sector development plans. These have been used to inform the self-assessment process. Inspectors agreed with the key strengths identified in the self-assessment report, and could track where identified weaknesses have been addressed. The grade awarded is higher than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ comprehensive quality assurance systems effectively audited
- ◆ well-qualified quality assurance specialists
- ◆ all staff involved in continuous improvement plans
- ◆ rigorous internal verification in engineering
- ◆ prompt and effective action taken in response to feedback
- ◆ identification and sharing of good practice

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some unaddressed poor practice by new subcontractor

50. The quality assurance system encompasses well-established procedures. These procedures are understood by staff and cover each part of the training process and procedures which influence the experience of the trainees, such as induction, initial assessment and so on. Staff have contributed to the development of these procedures. There is a rigorous programme of internal audits including observation of training, assessment and verification processes. The three members of staff who perform the audits have years of experience in quality assurance. They have extensive senior management experience, one of them as a quality assurance

manager. They are quality assurance consultants for other contracting companies, giving advice on Investors in People Standards and quality management at a variety of levels. An audit schedule is drawn up and agreed at senior management meetings. A 'staff quality responsibilities' chart is used to prioritise audits and ensure every part of the system is covered. Staff have a good awareness of the procedures that are relevant to their job. All staff are encouraged to take a positive approach to self-assessment.

51. The internal verifiers are able to identify improvements to their working practices arising from quality audit reports. In engineering, there is a rigorous internal verification system. Procedural requirements are set out in the quality assurance system. Observation of assessment is effectively recorded. All results are shared with assessors. The assessment planning process, judgements about trainees' performance and how trainees' feedback is given are recorded. Internal verification of business administration is satisfactory.

52. In-Comm's customer charter highlights the aim to exceed customers' expectations. Trainees and employers' satisfaction surveys are effectively used to collect feedback. The procedure for gathering this information includes time constraints so that evaluation is appropriate to those trainees who actually provided feedback. Many of the analysed surveys reflect how trainees regard their training at various stages of their programme. More than 90 per cent of returned feedback questionnaires indicate satisfaction. Current surveys mirror the key aspects found within *Raising the Standard*. Feedback is specifically gathered on training and assessment. The way the questions are phrased informs the process, so that trainees have a clearer understanding of what they should expect in good training and assessment. Within a section on trainees' achievements, trainees have the opportunity to state whether or not targets for completion of units have been set. Managers analyse responses to customer surveys. The analysis results in discussions among senior management and sector groups, producing action plans identifying targets for improvement. Recent improvements include adaptations to the review process, and uniform assessment plans based on good practice picked from all occupational areas. Sector groups, for each occupational area, meet regularly to discuss arising issues, review processes and identify good practice. There are also cross-sector meetings in which staff from different areas look at training quality overall.

53. As a preferred supplier of training services to three major employers, the company is subject to annual external audits. Arrangements also ensure that the company meets the exacting requirements of the three group-training associations. Whenever the company has been subject to audit where recommendations for improvements are made, they are quickly implemented. For example, some engineering companies had delayed registering their trainees for the NVQ at level 3. This was identified during an audit, and letters were sent within two weeks to the companies requesting their attention to this. There were follow up visits to further ensure action had been taken.

54. Benchmarking is undertaken by senior management. The process has included analysis of NVQ performance outcomes locally and regionally. Best practice is identified, particularly in engineering training. Reports on local training providers by the Training Standards Council have been carefully analysed and resulted in the dissemination of quality improvement reports at management and sector meetings.

55. The quality of training and other services provided by a new subcontractor have been monitored during the last six months. Four rigorous audits have taken place and good training has been identified. However, the audits identified concerns in several areas but appropriate action has not been taken. Discussions continue between the subcontractor and In-Comm.

56. In-Comm's quality assurance system includes a checklist to identify when a work placement company does not adequately conform to the work-placement agreements. However, this does not clearly set out at what stage a company would not be used for work placements.