



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT APRIL 1999

Nortec Training Ltd

SUMMARY

Nortec Training is a well-managed training provider, offering good training to young people employed in administration, retail and distribution. Staff are adept at helping trainees and their employers make an informed choice about the most appropriate qualification. They ensure that trainees gain a broad and deep knowledge of their work, give them effective support in the event of difficulty, and help to keep them motivated. On completion of their qualification, the company helps trainees to realise their full potential by encouraging them to pursue further qualifications. It also offers effective information technology skills training for people returning to the labour market and provides a supportive outdoor project for long-term unemployed and other socially excluded people. Nortec Training also provides satisfactory engineering training, which it subcontracts to local further education colleges. Nortec Training has effective management systems which keep track of trainees' progress, facilitate staff communication, and ensure compliance with the requirements of the local training and enterprise council (TEC) and the awarding bodies.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Engineering	3
Business administration	2
Retailing & customer service	2

GENERIC AREAS	GRADE
Equal opportunities	3
Trainee support	2
Management of training	1
Quality assurance	3

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ experienced, approachable, multi-skilled assessors
- ◆ comprehensive guidance for trainees on progression to further qualifications
- ◆ wide range of learning opportunities available in work placements
- ◆ well-motivated and enthusiastic trainees
- ◆ good-quality portfolios
- ◆ high achievement rates in business administration and customer service
- ◆ well-developed quality control procedures
- ◆ well-planned internal staff communication systems
- ◆ effective and thorough checks on trainees' progress
- ◆ good-quality resources for some engineering training
- ◆ effective pastoral support

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some trainees unaware of aspects of their training programme
- ◆ over-subjective initial assessment
- ◆ some employers not involved in training
- ◆ equal opportunities not promoted after induction
- ◆ achievements and destinations of trainees not regularly monitored by occupational area

INTRODUCTION

1. Nortec Training Limited (Nortec Training) is a company limited by guarantee, established in 1984 to provide government-funded vocational training. It was originally part of a local college, but is now wholly independent. Its council of management comprises three people, including two members of the senior management team, who are also the directors of Nortec, a private company which provides training on a fee-paying basis. Although the two companies are closely linked, they are financially distinct and trade separately. Nortec Training Ltd has contracts with Heart of England TEC to deliver work-based training to young people under the age of 25, to long-term unemployed adults over the age of 25, and to provide full-time education and training to unemployed people eligible for the New Deal for 18 to 24 year-olds. It also has a franchise with a college of further education to provide training and education to a wide range of employed and unemployed people. Public funding for its partnership work with the college derives from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC).

2. Nortec Training is based on one site in Banbury, in north Oxfordshire. This is an area of high employment and only 800 of the 47,000 residents of Banbury are unemployed. In 1998, a business information group identified Banbury as the town with the highest proportion of profit-making businesses in Britain. At 1.4 per cent, unemployment in Banbury, Bicester and the surrounding areas is at the lowest rate ever recorded in the area. This compares to an average of 4 per cent in the southeast of England. Over a third of the Oxfordshire workforce is qualified to at least the equivalent of a level 4 national vocational qualification (NVQ). Seven per cent have attained a level 5. This high proportion partly reflects the needs of Oxford University and the large number of scientific and research-based employers in the south of the county. The local district council, Cherwell, lists among its major concerns the general skills levels of the working population and the employability skills of young people. In 1998, the percentage of school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 46.5 per cent, compared with the national average of 46.3 per cent. In contrast, many local schools fare less well. Only 36 per cent of pupils from Banbury School, 34 per cent from Bicester Community College and nine per cent from Drayton School in Banbury attain the same level. Seventy per cent of school students remain in full-time education beyond the minimum school leaving age. Three per cent of the population of Banbury are from minority ethnic groups.

3. At the time of inspection, Nortec Training had 204 people on its training programmes funded through its TEC contracts and two on the New Deal scheme for people aged 18 to 24. One hundred and sixty-eight of them were young people, of whom 86 per cent were training in administrative, retail, warehousing or customer service occupations. All but two of the 168 young people are employees of local firms, which are mainly small businesses, but include one large national food distribution company, which employs 12 of the trainees. The 36 adults were all

unemployed. Twenty-seven were training in administration, eight were helping to restore part of the Stratford Canal, and one was training in retail. The 186 trainees on the business administration, retail and engineering programmes were subject to this inspection.

	Work-based learning for young people	New Deal aged 18-24	Work-based learning for adults	TOTAL
Business administration	54	2	27	83
Retail	90	0	1	91
Engineering	12	0	0	12
Canal project	0	0	8	8
Other	12	0	0	12
TOTAL	168	2	36	206

INSPECTION FINDINGS

4. Nortec Training Ltd produced its second self-assessment report in October 1998. The three operational managers developed the report, taking views from other staff where they thought it appropriate. They based the format on their first self-assessment report, which was prepared in advance of a pilot inspection in March 1998. The report from the pilot inspection helped inform the company's self-assessment process for the Training Standards Council. Senior managers checked the report, before making amendments and making it accessible to all staff. Extensive documentary evidence was supplied to support the findings and this was clearly cross-referenced in the report, facilitating the inspection process.

5. A team of four inspectors spent a total of 16 days at Nortec Training in April 1999. Inspectors interviewed 17 of the 24 employees, including the two senior managers and the three operational managers. Inspectors also interviewed the sole non-executive director, 67 trainees, 21 workplace supervisors and three college staff. They visited 23 companies, one community project and one college. They observed training sessions, interrogated one of the company's computerised databases and reviewed a wide range of documents, including trainees' NVQ portfolios and files, contracts with companies, external verifiers' reports, records of internal meetings, management reports and information produced for the TEC.

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Engineering

Grade 3

6. There are 12 trainees in engineering occupations, of whom six are in electronic servicing engineering, three are in foundation engineering, one is in engineering maintenance and two are in motor vehicle, including the only modern apprentice. All trainees are employed and attend one of two colleges of further education one day each week during term time to pursue their chosen NVQ or another certificated course. Qualified college staff carry out all training and assessment. Five of the electronic servicing trainee engineers are in the second year of the course, which leads to an electronic servicing qualification. The other is in the third and final year. One trainee is in the first year of an engineering maintenance course, leading to the City and Guilds 2280 qualification. Three trainees are pursuing NVQs in foundation engineering at level 2. The sole modern apprentice is training in vehicle mechanical and electrical systems and the other motor vehicle trainee is pursuing an NVQ in body repair at level 2. Of the 17 people who left in the past three years, three gained NVQs at level 2 and a further four gained NVQs at levels 2 and 3. Some of the strengths identified in the self-assessment report were agreed on and inspectors identified additional strengths and weaknesses. They awarded the same grade as that proposed in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good-quality resources for some off-the-job training
- ◆ productive working relationships among trainees, provider, some subcontractors and employers
- ◆ motivated and enthusiastic trainees
- ◆ good-quality portfolios
- ◆ good tracking systems
- ◆ good integration of key skills into motor vehicle programmes

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ trainees' progress restricted by academic year
- ◆ little communication between some on- and off-the-job trainers
- ◆ reviewing staff not occupationally qualified
- ◆ low achievement rates

7. Nortec Training provides a range of engineering training options to meet local demand. All off-the-job training is subcontracted to two local colleges of further education. One college has a high level of resources. All workshops are clean and bright and equipment is plentiful and well maintained. This college benefits from sponsorship and involvement with several large, national companies, which adds to the quality of the general resources and enables the provision of equipment such as aero and good-quality motor-vehicle engines. Nortec Training's trainees join mainstream courses and benefit from these resources. The college has very effective assessment procedures in place, which are supported by good tracking systems. Trainees have a personal copy of their progress on a tracking system, which is kept in their portfolios. The tracking system is reproduced in a larger format and is displayed on the workshop walls. The system clearly shows what achievement has been made at element level. All trainees are aware of their assessment, current position and future progress and achievement. The internal verification process is well planned, documented and implemented and the engineering department is finalising the process of observing assessment practice. Trainees' progress is restricted, as training is scheduled around the academic year of the colleges. Trainees present good-quality portfolios. They can locate evidence in their portfolios very easily; drawings and written exercises are clear, neat and descriptive. Test pieces are of a good standard and trainees can give very good descriptive evidence of their production, which is supported by documentary evidence in their portfolios.

8. The motor-vehicle department in the college has carried out some good work regarding the implementation and integration of key skills. A handbook has been developed for trainees which has simplified the language and made the process more manageable and understandable. The handbook guides trainees through the development and acquisition of key skills, which begins at NVQ level 1, in the first year and is completed at NVQ level 3 in the third year. The department has also

developed a comprehensive three-day staff training course, offering a nationally recognised training qualification.

9. Nortec Training has developed productive working relationships with one college, which benefits both employers and trainees. Engineering staff from the college are encouraged to visit trainees in the workplace and to liaise closely with the employer. All trainees are highly motivated and enthusiastic about their training, both at college and in the workplace.

10. Staff at the other college, attended by the six electronic-servicing trainee engineers and the motor-vehicle body-repair trainee, have very little contact with workplace trainers or supervisors. There is no co-ordination of on- and off-the-job-training. Reviews are well managed and well documented but the provider does not have a member of staff with occupational expertise. This restricts the ability of Nortec Training's staff to individualise a trainee's training plan and to negotiate its implementation with the employer.

11. Achievement rates over the past three years have decreased. There has been a high drop-out rate as a result of trainees' dissatisfaction with one of the colleges. In 1996-97, only one of the four leavers gained an NVQ, in 1997-98 three of the five leavers achieved NVQs, and in 1998-99 only three of the eight leavers achieved NVQs. Most of those who left in 1998-99 did so because they were dissatisfied with their day-release training at a local college. In response to this, Nortec Training had a number of meetings with this college, and developed a closer working relationship with another college, which now provides engineering training and assessment for five young people to a very high standard. This college does not provide training in electronics and the six trainee electronics engineers continue to attend the original college. The level of dissatisfaction was less pronounced in electronics than in other aspects of engineering at the college. Also, this college is the only one within a wide area which provides training in electronic engineering. The one trainee in motor-vehicle body repair preferred to remain at this college, as it is more convenient for him.

Business administration

Grade 2

12. Nortec Training has 83 trainees in this area, of whom 54 are on TEC-funded youth training programmes, including 41 modern apprentices. These youth trainees are all employed and are based for four or five days a week with their employers. Two other young people are unemployed and funded through New Deal. Twenty-seven other trainees are also unemployed, and funded through the TEC on an adult training programme. They are based in Nortec Training's own training centre, where they learn information technology skills up to NVQ level 2. Of the 56 youth trainees, 26 are trainee administrators, 15 are trainee accountants and 15, including the two on the New Deal programme, are training in information technology. All but four are working towards NVQs at levels 2 or 3. Three of the trainee administrators and one trainee accountant are on programmes leading to NVQs at level 4. A total of 41 employers in Banbury and the surrounding area provides employment or work

placements. Most trainees are based in small- to medium-sized enterprises. A training officer from Nortec Training conducts reviews with each trainee every 13 weeks, and assessors visit regularly to carry out formative assessments and to advise and support the trainees as they build up their NVQ evidence. With the exception of some trainee accountants and accounts clerks, most of the training takes place in the workplace. This is supplemented by short training courses at Nortec Training, and, for some trainees in accounts, day-release courses at a local college.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ high achievement rates
- ◆ work placements provide a wide range of learning opportunities
- ◆ well-equipped training rooms for information technology
- ◆ good-quality evidence in many NVQ portfolios
- ◆ some good assessment reports

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some trainees do not fully understand the assessment process
- ◆ no overall assessment until the end of the programme
- ◆ individual training plans not used to inform trainees' development

13. Nortec Training has a high achievement rate for business administration trainees, currently standing at approximately 86 per cent of those starting the programmes. All aspects of business administration have a similarly high rate of success, whether in accounts, administration or information technology training. Some trainees achieve success in more than one discipline within business administration, for example, information technology as well as accounts. On achieving their planned outcome, many trainees progress to more advanced qualifications.

14. Trainees are employed in a variety of workplaces, the majority of which can provide experience of the different work activities required to generate evidence against the NVQ standards. Nortec Training's assessment staff encourage placement supervisors and managers to move the trainees around departments, so that they broaden their experience, skill and knowledge. As a result of this, the evidence presented in many of the portfolios is of a high quality in terms of currency and authenticity.

15. Assessments are work based and some of the assessment reports describe trainees' activities in detail. This helps trainees relate the work they do in their employment to the specific parts of the qualification, and also provides information for them to cross-reference against the different elements of the qualification. It is also useful at the end of the assessment process.

16. The final assessment takes place at the end of the programme, when the evidence collected by trainees is recorded and cross-referenced against the standards. This method prevents those trainees who may leave the programme early from claiming accreditation for the part of the qualification they have completed. Furthermore, it results in some trainees being unsure of how to construct their portfolio of evidence and of what is involved in the assessment process.

17. Information technology training rooms are well equipped, with computers for each trainee and current versions of the standard software packages. An initial individual training plan is prepared with each trainee at the start of their programme, with varying degrees of detail. For trainees training full time in the training centre, this plan is not revisited during the programme and is not used to develop further action points as trainees progress. For the majority of trainees, action plans are agreed at the end of each assessment visit, for implementation before the next visit.

Retailing & customer service

Grade 2

18. The company trains more young people in retail, customer service and distribution than in any other occupational area. Ninety of the 91 trainees are young people under the age of 25, and this includes 72 modern apprentices and five national trainees. All are employed except two, who have learning difficulties, and one sole trainee aged over 25. Like the others, these three are based full time in the workplace. Nortec Training provides training at its centre on both a drop-in and planned basis for information technology and other key skills. Forty-eight of the trainees are training towards an NVQ in customer service, mostly at level 3. Sixteen trainees are taking NVQs in retail at levels 2 or 3. Three of these are also taking a supplementary NVQ in customer service. All but three of the twenty-five young people training in warehousing and distribution are modern apprentices in three companies. Some of them are also working towards an NVQ in forklift truck driving at level 2. Four of the providers' staff assess or verify the assessment of trainees' competence and knowledge. There are no assessors employed in trainees' workplaces. The awarding body has granted Nortec Training postal verification, which indicates their satisfaction with the assessment and verification of NVQs. Inspectors awarded the same grade as that proposed by the provider.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ experienced, approachable, multi-skilled assessors
- ◆ placements facilitate good-quality work-based evidence
- ◆ frequent visits by assessors
- ◆ effective communication links among assessors, reviewers and employers

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some employers not involved in training
- ◆ some trainees unaware of their progress

GOOD PRACTICE

This is an example of assessors using their knowledge and experience to advise trainees. A new trainee recently joined Nortec Training after being dissatisfied with another training provider. The trainee had a partially completed portfolio of evidence for a retail qualification, but had not been registered with the awarding body. After close examination of the trainee's portfolio, the working environment and the trainee's career aspirations, the assessor recommended qualifications in customer service and management, which were more appropriate.

19. The assessors' knowledge of a range of qualifications at different levels has a positive impact on the trainees' success. When the young people or their employers approach Nortec Training, they are often uncertain as to the most suitable qualification. Assessors are very good at making quick and accurate judgements on this, based on their understanding of the qualification, discussion with the employer as to the opportunities for learning within that environment, and the learning needs, aspirations and abilities of the trainees. Assessors successfully guide potential trainees in choosing the most suitable NVQ in the occupational range, as well as the level that best suits their ability and the workplace opportunities available.

20. The assessors' good working relationship with employers is an important factor in trainees' development. Employers respond positively to the assessors' recommendations and move the trainees to different areas of the workplace where they can acquire more skills, competence and knowledge, and easily generate evidence of these for their qualification portfolios. The trainees' workplaces provide many and varied opportunities. These not only broaden the trainees' experience but also enable them to continually use a wide range of evidence for their qualifications.

21. Assessors visit workplaces frequently to assess trainees. These visits help to ensure that the trainees remain interested and committed to the achievement of their qualification, and serve to inform them as to which part of their qualification they need to focus on before the next assessment visit. Frequent visits also allow the assessing staff to remind the trainees of their progress in detail. All workplaces are visited monthly and some weekly. The team of assessors works closely together, and more than one assessor may assess an individual trainee, should the opportunity arise during company visits. Key skills are well integrated into the process. Trainees gather, sort and present evidence of their occupational knowledge and competence.

22. Trainee attendance is good and a high percentage of trainees achieve their first identified qualification, which in most cases reflects the competence required in their daily work. Following completion of this qualification, many progress to an NVQ at level 3 for which they are given challenging assignments to demonstrate their competence.

23. Some employers, although satisfied with the training and assessment, have little involvement or understanding of the NVQ process. This means that opportunities for further training or development may be lost.

24. A minority of trainees does not have a clear understanding of all aspects of the qualification they are pursuing, or their progress towards achievement of that qualification. They are unsure of which competencies they have successfully demonstrated and which competencies they still need to prove.

25. Nortec Training misses the opportunity to accredit the prior knowledge and competence of some young people, even in cases where they may have some years'

experience before starting the training programme. However, the effect on these trainees is mitigated by the well-focused approach which ensures timely achievement of the qualification in most cases.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 3

26. The company's equal opportunities policy is contained in a staff handbook which is issued to all new employees at induction. Reference is also made to it in the trainees' training agreement. The policy meets the requirements of the local TEC. The staff handbook also contains details of all supporting procedures. Trainee recruitment is monitored for gender, ethnicity and disability. The provider uses contractual documents when making agreements with employers which require signatories to confirm that they will agree to operate an equal opportunities policy. Inspectors agreed with some of the provider's proposed strengths and weaknesses, and identified further strengths and weaknesses. The grade awarded was the same as that proposed in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ comprehensive equal opportunities policy
- ◆ wheelchair access to training centre
- ◆ good support for people with disabilities
- ◆ active recruitment of socially excluded, long-term unemployed people

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ policy not promoted to employers or trainees after induction
- ◆ little training in equal opportunities beyond induction
- ◆ little evaluation of equal opportunities data
- ◆ unsystematic target-setting and action-planning

27. The provider has a comprehensive equal opportunities policy, which is supported by procedures and understood by members of staff. Trainees are informed of their rights and responsibilities regarding equal opportunities at induction. They are also informed of the level of support that they will have from the provider, through the review process and their own employers. While the company expresses a commitment to equal opportunities, its policy and philosophy are not promoted to trainees or employers after this initial involvement. Trainees and supervisory and managerial staff display little more than a cursory knowledge of equal opportunities. Apart from at induction, the provider does not offer any training or awareness-raising in equal opportunities. Equal opportunities issues have been raised, discussed and recorded as part of the Investors in People meetings but the lack of a formal

approach has led to a lack of awareness by employers, trainees and Nortec Training's staff.

28. There is wheelchair access to the training rooms on the ground floor, which provide a good training environment in information technology. The provider has recently been awarded the Employment Service's 'Positive About Disability' award and an accessible bell has been installed at the front of their premises to further enhance the wheelchair access.

29. Nortec Training is actively involved in the recruitment of socially excluded, long-term unemployed people through its links with local statutory and voluntary groups, including the probation service, and projects to help people read and write better. These projects, as well as the Employment Service, are sources of recruitment for Nortec Training's contract with the local water company to assist in the maintenance of the Stratford Canal.

30. Nortec Training collects data on ethnicity, gender and disability as required by the TEC, but it does not analyse these data. It does not set equal opportunities targets. Three per cent of the local population are from minority ethnic groups but there is only one trainee from a minority ethnic group out of the 206 on the programmes. This is less than half of one per cent, or six times less than the proportion in the local population.

Trainee support

Grade 2

31. All trainees at Nortec Training, whether recruited as employees or otherwise, are selected by a process of interview, and application form. If successful, they have a comprehensive induction and sign an agreement demonstrating this. Nortec Training does not target young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities as specialist training is available locally. The two young people with learning disabilities on the programme were recruited in response to specific requests from their parents, who also provided their work placements. Nortec Training's staff make it clear to referral organisations such as the careers service, and to the schools that they regularly visit, that it does not have particular expertise in assisting people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. If unable to provide the level of support needed to a potential trainee, Nortec Training refers them to another, more appropriate training provider, or to the careers service for further guidance. In contrast, learning difficulties are not a barrier to entry to one of the training programmes for long-term unemployed adults. Where appropriate, Nortec Training's staff arrange additional literacy tuition with one of the three specialist organisations locally. Support for young people at their workplaces is co-ordinated by Nortec Training's assessors, who visit them frequently. This support is aimed at resolving any difficulties they may encounter, particularly with their employment or off-the-job training. Nortec Training's staff arrange for this support to be reinforced by supplementary visits from a member of their own staff, who comes every three months, and from the local careers service, who visit every six months.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ well-developed and effective pastoral support
- ◆ speedy resolution of trainees' difficulties, issues and concerns
- ◆ easily accessible support for trainees on the job
- ◆ excellent working relationships between trainees and staff
- ◆ comprehensive and apt guidance on progression to further qualifications
- ◆ well-planned and -resourced support following completion of programme

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ a few trainees unaware of some aspects of their training programme
- ◆ overly subjective initial assessment

32. There is good pastoral support for trainees. In addition to making frequent assessments, assessors also fulfil a pastoral role. They quickly resolve any difficulties trainees may have with their college, or with their employer. Nortec Training has a well-developed support system, whereby an additional member of staff visits each trainee on a three-monthly cycle to monitor and review them. As well as checking compliance with all aspects of its TEC contract, these supplementary visits by a reviewing officer are used to help trainees to overcome any potential personality clashes that they may have with their assessor.

33. Nortec Training's support systems ensure that trainees at work placements can access support on demand. Trainees and employers know how to contact Nortec Training's staff in between visits, and are aware that they can telephone, fax or e-mail at any time and get a rapid response. The effective teamwork among assessors and reviewing staff ensures that they cover each other in the event of absence for holiday or sickness. At monthly meetings, managers check the progress of each trainee with the assessors. This is an effective double check against the possibility of any trainee missing the assessment or support that they need. Where appropriate, Nortec Training gives trainees suitable protective clothing so that their start date is not delayed. In the case of the canal maintenance project, protective clothing includes safety boots, overalls, and gloves.

GOOD PRACTICE

A group of trainees at one company complained to their reviewing officer about the style and approach of their assessor. The reviewing officer handled the matter sensitively. The trainees observed that the assessor addressed all their concerns without any comeback or rancour, and the assessment process greatly improved.

34. The canal project is dependent on an effective working relationship between trainees and Nortec Training's supervisor. This works well, and is an important factor in trainees attending the programme. Many trainees have not worked for many years; some have not worked since leaving school, and some rarely attended school. Many have spent time in prison. It is because of their respect for the staff, and because of the staff's commitment and encouragement that mature trainees regularly attend literacy classes. Staff carefully discuss which of the three adult literacy providers would best suit the trainees, and accompany them, if needed, to their interview there, and arrange day-release sessions as appropriate.

35. When trainees have completed the qualification identified in their original training plan, the multi-skilled assessors offer good guidance on progression to

GOOD PRACTICE

A trainee florist was having difficulty complying with the demand by the college staff to provide flowers for classes. She reported this to Nortec support staff who quickly resolved the issue, so that from the next week, the college provided the necessary flowers.

further qualifications. Trainees are encouraged to reach their full potential by progressing either to a higher level within that particular occupational area, or to a more generic qualification such as NVQs in management or customer service. If TEC funding is no longer available in any of these cases, Nortec Training's staff encourage employers to purchase training and assessment from its sister company or research other public funding opportunities.

36. Where trainees are on time-limited training programmes, Nortec Training continues to support them in the achievement of their training goals. For all trainees, this support involves continued assessment towards the achievement of a previously identified and targeted qualification. The support they receive is identical to that provided for all other trainees. For trainees leaving the adult learning programmes without securing employment, support also includes job search assistance. If trainees on youth learning programmes are sacked by their employer, Nortec Training helps them to find alternative employment.

GOOD PRACTICE

An assessor helped a young dyslexic trainee to prepare for their written theory driving test. This was supplementary to the trainee's training programme. The trainee was taught distances and, when judged ready for the test, the provider arranged a reader. The trainee subsequently passed the test.

37. A minority of trainees is unaware of some significant aspects of their training programme. A few are unclear as to whether their training programme includes key skills. A few trainees are unsure of the actual programme they are on, whether or not they are modern apprentices, or what level of NVQ they are working towards. Some trainees on the canal project are unsure of the date their programme ends, even when they are nearing the end of the programme. They are also unclear as to whether they have the opportunity to extend their programme.

38. Nortec Training does not have sufficient criteria to determine trainees' suitability for a programme at interview. The interviewers take into account the literacy skills of the candidates, making an assessment of their ability in this area, based on their completion of an application form, and weighing this against the level of literacy skills demanded by trainees' employment aspirations. Trainees' numerical ability is often not assessed. The initial assessment process is part of the selection process and relies on the subjective judgement of the interviewers. Some, but not all, courses require a minimum level of basic skills or key skills. The canal project accepts applicants irrespective of their command of basic skills. There is no guidance to the interviewers as to what criteria to use to assess either basic or key skills, irrespective of whether the purpose of that assessment is to identify suitability for the programme or the level of need to be addressed by the provider.

Management of training**Grade 1**

39. Nortec Training employs some people for specific contracts as well as full-time and part-time staff. The staffing complement varies, and is currently equivalent to 23 full-time posts. About half of the full-time staff have been employed by Nortec Training for at least five years, and many for much longer. Nortec Training achieved the Investors in People Standard in August 1997. It has a comprehensive, regularly reviewed and up-to-date staff handbook, outlining staff recruitment, induction and development practices and procedures within the organisation, as well as the staff appraisal system, and the equal opportunities policy.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ co-operative relationships with external organisations
- ◆ well-planned internal communication systems
- ◆ effective and thorough checks on trainees' progress
- ◆ targets regularly reviewed
- ◆ supportive management increases staff effectiveness

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ missed opportunities for using computerised data

GOOD PRACTICE

Nortec Training recently organised the smooth and rapid transfer of a trainee from one college to another, following a poor training experience. The trainee was delighted and impressed with the speed with which staff responded and that the new college sent a member of staff to interview him at his workplace, whereas staff at the previous college had never visited him at work.

40. Nortec Training's effective and co-operative relationships with a wide range of external organisations are critical in ensuring that trainees achieve their targeted qualifications in good time. The management and staff appreciate how critical employers are to the trainees' success, and put a high priority on responding to employers' enquiries and needs. Colleges also play an important role. Managers appreciate that although they are buying a service from colleges, the small number of trainees at some colleges means that they do not have the leverage to ensure that colleges provide service of a sufficient quality. They have addressed this issue by developing a close working relationship with, and becoming an associate member of one college. This gives them a greater ability to ensure that issues raised by them are addressed by the college. Where possible they have arranged transfer of trainees from other colleges to that one. Nortec Training's staff and managers have also developed co-operative relationships with the careers service, local schools and a local community forum for recruitment purposes. The senior management team has close links with national and local organisations, which enable them to keep abreast of national developments in training which may affect their trainees, and of European funding opportunities to enable them to offer additional services to local unemployed people.

41. Following recognition as an Investor in People (IiP), managers set up regular meetings to ensure that the good internal communication systems established during the IiP process were maintained. The meetings are monthly, and comprise small groups of staff from different sections and tiers of the organisation. These are effective. All staff are aware of the goals of the organisation, progress towards those objectives, and how they can contribute to achieving them. The meetings also allow issues to be raised and addressed in an open forum. Consequently, staff are very clear about their precise roles. Staff are appraised annually and any development needs are addressed.

42. Another series of meetings enables staff to keep a check on the progress of all trainees. Each assessor goes through their caseload with the two main contract managers and the NVQ quality manager. This process complements the individual progress-checking by assessors, and ensures that no trainee is overlooked, and that all trainees achieve at a timely rate. If, following an assessment of a trainee, an

assessor has deferred or brought forward their targeted completion date, this will be reported at this meeting, and adjustments made accordingly. Contract achievement targets are also reviewed at these meetings and, if necessary, are also adjusted.

43. Senior managers give practical and generous support to their staff in the event of difficulties in their personal circumstances. This support generates staff loyalty to the organisation. It also serves as an example to the staff who, in turn, provide support to trainees in difficulty.

44. Nortec Training has a number of management information systems for recording information about trainees. There is a database system used to provide comprehensive information for the TEC. As it did not meet all of Nortec Training's requirements, it set up another database in the summer of 1998, to provide accurate management information on all those taking NVQs. This database is being further developed. Nortec Training has some difficulties with extracting accurate information regarding trainees' achievements and retention rates, but is addressing this problem.

Quality assurance

Grade 3

45. Nortec Training meets both the external quality standards required by the TEC with which it contracts and the requirements of the relevant awarding bodies. It has a team of key staff to represent all relevant areas. The contract compliance manager organises and conducts regular internal audits. Other staff involvement in the quality assurance process is facilitated through regular monthly team meetings. Nortec Training uses a software programme to evaluate its services by way of questionnaires, which are sent to trainees at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of their programmes, as well as to employers.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ well-developed quality assurance procedures
- ◆ quality assurance systems ensure contractual targets consistently exceeded
- ◆ effective action taken in response to self-assessment

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no regular monitoring of trainees' achievements by occupational area
- ◆ quality assurance arrangements not fully documented
- ◆ quality assurance arrangements do not always lead to continuous improvements

46. Nortec Training has developed an effective quality control system led by a contract compliance manager, who is also responsible for all aspects of work-based training for young people. The regular audits of assurance procedures and the regular discussions of the findings by staff teams at all levels of the organisation, ensure complete compliance with the requirements of the funding bodies. This includes ensuring that adequate systems are in place at all workplaces and colleges used for training. Assessment meetings, led by the NVQ quality manager, and attended by the two training contract managers, ensure compliance with the requirements of the qualification awarding bodies. In the event of a representative from the awarding body reporting that improvements need to be made, the NVQ quality manager raises the issue at the assessment meeting and ensures that effective action is taken. The internal verification process exceeds the requirements of the qualification awarding bodies.

47. Nortec Training regularly reviews its performance against the achievement of the number and level of qualifications specified in its contract with the TEC. Its management, support and assessment systems help to ensure that it consistently exceeds these targets. As a result, the TEC has increased its qualification target over the past three years.

48. Nortec Training uses external support to help with the self-assessment process and to develop action plans for addressing weaknesses. The organisation volunteered for the Training Standards Council's pilot inspection programme and, in many instances, has used the results to improve the identified areas of weakness. The self-assessment report produced by Nortec Training identified many of its strengths and weaknesses, but in some instances it confused normally expected compliance with strengths and, in one or two instances, failed to recognise weaknesses. Nevertheless, self-assessment is beginning to have an impact on the quality of training.

49. The company collects trainee data as required by the TEC, but it does not use them to evaluate trainees' achievements or retention by occupational area. This makes it difficult for the organisation to specify weaknesses in terms of occupational areas, to draw up action plans for improvement, or to measure improvements using objective criteria.

50. Although the system of quality control currently in place is effective, many areas of quality assurance are not fully documented. There is no over-arching quality assurance system, or defined procedures for achieving continuous improvements. This prevents the quality assurance systems from being reviewed systematically.