



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT FEBRUARY 1999

Strategic Training Solutions

SUMMARY

Strategic Training Solutions provides satisfactory training in business administration and retail and customer service. Trainees have a good understanding of the national vocational qualification (NVQ) process in all the occupational areas. The company has not developed a business plan; its policies and procedures are not all fully developed. There is a comprehensive system for internal verification. The company has an equal opportunities policy and grievance procedure which employers and trainees understand. Support for trainees, including regular workplace visits, is flexible and meets their individual needs. The company collects data from trainees on a range of issues, but these are not evaluated or used to improve practice. There are incomplete systems for initial assessment, and key skills are not fully integrated in training.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Business administration	3
Retailing & customer service	3

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

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ good understanding of NVQ process among trainees
- ◆ flexible and individual delivery of NVQs
- ◆ frequent and supportive workplace visits
- ◆ comprehensive internal verification system

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ key skills not fully integrated
- ◆ incomplete systems for initial assessment
- ◆ equal opportunities data not used to improve mix of trainees
- ◆ no business plan

INTRODUCTION

1. Strategic Training Solutions (STS) was founded by two partners, initially with one employee, in January 1998. This has now increased to five. The company is currently recruiting an additional trainer. The company operates from its centre in Mansfield and uses work placements in North Nottinghamshire, including Worksop, Newark, Retford and Nottingham city centre. Work placements are diverse, ranging from small companies to high-street stores and banks.
2. At the time of inspection STS had 23 trainees following government-funded programmes. It offers training programmes in two occupational areas: business administration, information technology and retailing and customer service, with trainees working towards NVQs at levels 2 and 3. The work-based training is funded by North Nottinghamshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC). This area of work currently provides approximately 60 per cent of the company's business. STS subcontracts a small amount of work to South Nottinghamshire Training Agency, which was not involved in the self-assessment report's production. Trainees generally spend their time in the workplace. However, there are flexible arrangements to bring individuals into the centre to complete tasks which they are unable to carry out at work.
3. The company recruits most of its trainees from North Nottinghamshire, although most live locally. Only 0.5 per cent of the population of North Nottinghamshire is from a minority ethnic group. In 1998, the proportion of North Nottinghamshire school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 36.2 per cent, compared with the national average of 46.3 per cent. Unemployment in North Nottinghamshire is low, at 4.8 per cent, compared with the national average of 5.2 per cent.
4. The pattern of employment change in North Nottinghamshire over this decade shows that the local economy suffered far more severely than that nationally and regionally, in terms of net job losses. The main reason for this was the collapse of the local coal-mining industry. Currently, there has been a recovery in the manufacturing industry, resulting in a small increase in employment, with mixed performance in the service sector.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

5. Strategic Training Solutions produced its first self-assessment report with the support of North Nottinghamshire TEC, in response to external inspection. All staff in the company were involved. The report accurately identified several weaknesses. However, inspectors identified several others. Some of the strengths identified were judged by inspectors to be compliance with contract or no more than normal practice, but strengths not claimed in the self-assessment report were identified by inspectors.

6. A team of three inspectors spent a total of nine days at the company's site during February 1999. Inspectors met trainees, trainers and employers. They interviewed 13 trainees, visited nine work placements, interviewed four employers and held six interviews with company staff. Inspectors also observed one assessment and three reviews.

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Business administration

Grade 3

7. Strategic Training Solutions has 11 trainees following qualifications in business administration, of whom six are modern apprentices, three are national trainees and two are youth trainees on the TEC's Career Plus programme (the TEC's name for youth training). Most trainees are either employed or on work placement. However, two are based full time at STS. Trainees are visited in the workplace, weekly or fortnightly, by their assessor, who assists them with portfolio-building. There are three members of staff responsible for the delivery and assessment of business administration NVQs. All have, or are working towards assessor awards. Most of the strengths claimed by STS were agreed by inspectors, but some refer to the same issue expressed in a variety of ways. Other strengths represent no more than contractual compliance. The weaknesses were confirmed, but were not all seen as significant. Inspectors identified additional strengths and weaknesses and awarded the same grade as that given by the company in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ flexible approach to training
- ◆ trainees clear about their programmes
- ◆ regular and frequent workplace visits by assessors

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some trainees not on target
- ◆ unstructured off-the-job training
- ◆ key skills not fully integrated

8. Most of the company's business administration trainees are highly motivated and enthusiastic about their programme. They understand what their qualification involves and know which level they are working towards and which units and elements they have covered to date. However, although some are clear about their completion date and are well on the way to meeting this, others are not sure when they are due to finish their qualification and are identified by assessors as not being on target to complete by the required date. Trainees are confident with the language of the NVQ, and most are able to complete and update their own tracking sheets without supervision.

9. Nine trainees are placed with an employer. Most of these do not attend STS for off-the-job training, but are visited in the workplace by an assessor. The assessor advises them about gathering evidence to meet assessment requirements, helps with portfolio-building and sets short-term targets. The company is flexible and responsive in its attitude towards workplace visits, arranging these to meet the needs of both employers and trainees. Visits generally take place once a week or once a fortnight, although recent staffing problems have resulted in some occurring only monthly. Trainees are encouraged to contact tutors by telephone, if they need help during the intervening period. They consider that this arrangement provides them with the support which they need. The company's flexibility also extends to the location of off-the-job training. One trainee has a working environment which is unsuitable for the completion of written work and which provides few opportunities for evidence-gathering. At the request of his employer, STS allows him to spend three days at its centre, carrying out administrative duties and portfolio-building, and the remaining two in the workplace, learning job-related skills. Two other trainees, unable to find a placement or employment, are based at STS full time.

10. Trainees based at STS's training centre are given substantial support by their assessor and are provided with opportunities to gather evidence of their competence and work on their portfolios. However, they do not follow a set work programme and do not have a defined work rôle. Although they have set daily tasks, these are not designed to form a backup to their NVQ training. There is no structured programme of off-the-job training, for either in-house trainees or those in the workplace. While trainers have an idea of the sequence in which they will assess units, they do not have a plan for the delivery of theory. Their discussions with trainees centre around evidence requirements and portfolio-building, with any training limited to the specific experience and employment context of individual trainees. This means that what a trainee learns may not be readily transferable to another working environment and that opportunities to develop and extend trainees' awareness are missed.

11. Nine of the company's 11 business administration trainees are modern apprentices or national trainees, and key skills are a mandatory part of their programme. To date, the company's teaching of these has taken place once trainees' occupational qualification has been completed, using a combination of cross-referencing from the NVQ and discrete assignments. Trainees do not see key skills as an integrated part of their programme, but as an addition. Efforts are now being made to teach key skills concurrently with the occupational aspect of the programme. However, these are not fully established, and it is too early to say how effective they will be.

Retailing & customer service

Grade 3

12. There are 12 trainees in this sector, 11 undertaking customer service NVQs (three at level 2 and eight at level 3). Of these, nine are modern apprentices, one is a national trainee and one is a youth trainee. There is one youth trainee taking a retail NVQ at level 2. Five of the customer service trainees are employed by a large leisure company in the town. The remaining trainees are either employed by or in work placements with a variety of smaller employers, eg hairdressers and photographers. All training and assessment takes place in the workplace. As Strategic Training Solutions has been operating for a relatively short time, it was unable to produce comprehensive achievement statistics, as many trainees who began their programme when the company commenced training are still on programme. However, results available show a 50 per cent pass rate for trainees on the national traineeship programme. STS' self-assessment report for this sector identified some strengths which were judged by inspectors to be no more than normal practice. Other strengths were agreed. Weaknesses identified by STS related to management of training. Inspectors identified weaknesses in the sector which had not been identified by the company. Inspectors awarded the same grade as the company in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ strong commitment from one large employer
- ◆ frequent workplace visits by trainers
- ◆ trainees have good understanding of NVQ process
- ◆ flexible and individually tailored training

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ key skills not fully integrated in the NVQ
- ◆ on-the-job training does not take account of the NVQ
- ◆ unstructured assessment-planning

13. Training and assessment in the retail sector are satisfactory, but unimaginative. Trainers work closely with individual trainees and employ a flexible approach, enabling trainees to progress steadily. Some learning support materials are used by some trainers. However, much of the training concentrates on demonstrating evidence of competence through portfolio development and does not enhance trainees' wider knowledge and understanding. Trainers visit trainees in the workplace very frequently, at least fortnightly and often weekly. Trainees find these visits useful to help them in identifying the types of evidence to gather for their portfolios. Short-term action plans are agreed on at these visits, but are not always documented for trainees, meaning that trainees have nothing to refer to after the visit and must rely on memory, which some trainees find difficult. Assessments are well documented, and trainers make use of naturally occurring evidence by observing assessments, often out of normal working hours to accommodate trainees' shift patterns. Plans for these assessments are not recorded, and trainees are not given structured assessment patterns. This means that the success of assessments relies on the judgement of individual trainers to fit them into trainees' work, without their having the opportunity to practise and feel comfortable about them.

14. All trainees have a clear understanding of the structure of their NVQ and the assessment process. Trainers take care to ensure that trainees understand evidence requirements, resulting in their taking ownership of developing portfolios of work and in equipping them with the ability to work without supervision. However, some trainees do not know the target date for achievement of their NVQ and have no perception of how long it will take them to complete their programmes.

15. Forty-two per cent of trainees are employed by one company, which is committed to supporting the trainees to achieve their qualifications. NVQ training is part of their staff development plan, and trainees are encouraged to take time out of work to develop their portfolios of evidence. Trainers visit the company freely. The company, with the support of STS, is training its managers to become workplace assessors, which will enable them to fully support trainees. As a result of STS' staffing changes and the employer's difficulties with staffing levels, trainees did not progress during November and December. This has now been resolved, with the appointment of a new trainer, and trainees are now back on target to achieve.

16. Generally, workplace training is not planned to take account of trainees' progress towards their NVQ. There is no integration of practical training and theoretical knowledge. Opportunities are missed to plan assessments in line with trainees' progress in the workplace.

17. The company has done much work to develop teaching of key skills units, including staff development for trainers to achieve their own key skills qualifications. However, key skills are currently accredited by cross-referencing to the trainees' portfolio evidence on completion of their NVQ. This means that trainees do not have the opportunity to recognise their development in key skills areas as they develop their occupational skills. Trainers are starting to address this with new trainees, but it is too early to judge how successful this will be.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 3

18. Strategic Training Solutions has an equal opportunities policy and a grievance procedure which is explained to trainees and employers. The company is situated in an area with few people from minority ethnic groups. It has no trainees from these groups. It offers mainly female-dominated occupational areas, but 25 per cent of the company's trainees are men. Equal opportunities data on trainees are collected using the quality assurance monitoring system. The strengths claimed by STS represent no more than compliance with contract. Inspectors identified other strengths. Some of the weaknesses identified during self-assessment had been addressed by the time of inspection. Inspectors awarded the same grade as that given by the company in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ clear equal opportunities and grievance policies
- ◆ comprehensive leaflet for employers on discrimination
- ◆ monitored equal opportunities data

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no equal opportunities statements on marketing materials
- ◆ equal opportunities data not used to improve training
- ◆ no targeted promotion to under-represented groups

19. Strategic Training Solutions has a clearly written equal opportunities policy, explained to trainees during induction and shown to employers when placements are negotiated. Trainees understand the meaning of equal opportunities and are able to explain in basic terms what it means to them. A leaflet is also available to trainees, describing, in more detail, the benefits and responsibilities involved in equal opportunities. The company has produced a thorough, detailed and well-presented additional leaflet about discrimination, given to all employers. It makes clear both the company's position and employers' obligations. However, staff have no training in equal opportunities and would not necessarily feel confident in recognising or dealing with relatively minor problems, such as potentially racist remarks by trainees. STS has clear grievance procedures to be followed by trainees who consider that they have been treated unfairly. Trainees are aware of these, understand the implications for them and know whom they should contact, if they have a complaint. They have a copy of the procedures in their handbook. There is a separate disciplinary and grievance procedure for staff, of which staff are aware.

20. The company collects and analyses equal opportunities data to produce a series of bar charts, including an overview of who drops out and why. However, the information generated is not used to identify under-represented groups or to inform

the way in which training is planned, marketed or delivered. Company staff are aware that the occupational areas which are offered tend to be female-dominated areas, and they welcome applications from male candidates. When attending a recent careers fair, the centre co-ordinator asked a male member of staff to accompany her, to provide a positive rôle model for potential male applicants. However, apart from this instance, the company is not active in directing its marketing towards under-represented groups or in attempting to attract either male candidates or those from minority ethnic groups. Staff have developed and produced a series of leaflets describing the individual NVQs offered. This series does not contain an equal opportunities statement or any indication that applications from under-represented groups are welcome. STS also advertises in the local press from time to time, when staff are required. No equal opportunities statement is included in these advertisements and there is no access for trainees with mobility difficulties. As yet, there are no procedures to monitor equal opportunities in subcontracted training.

Trainee support

Grade 3

21. Trainees are recruited using a variety of methods, often as a result of referrals from the careers service, but sometimes through direct contact with employers wanting to train their current employees. Strategic Training Solutions successfully places unemployed trainees with employers for work experience with the aim of securing employment for them when they have achieved their qualification. STS' approach is to offer individual, flexible support for trainees, who are well known to trainers, because of the relatively small numbers in training. However, few structured systems and procedures exist to underpin this area of work. STS was largely accurate in its self-assessment of this aspect, but overestimated the importance of its strengths. Consequently, the grade awarded on inspection is lower than that awarded by the company in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ flexible and supportive workplace visits
- ◆ opportunities for trainees to gain additional qualifications
- ◆ clear introduction to NVQs

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ incomplete systems for initial assessment
- ◆ no policy for accreditation of prior learning
- ◆ no guidelines for identifying appropriate programme

22. Trainers visit the workplace to conduct assessments at times to suit trainees, even when this is out of trainers' normal working hours. In addition, trainers often make arrangements to take laptop computers to trainees' workplaces to enable them

to access information technology resources. Most trainees are encouraged to take additional NVQs, helping them to realise their career aims. One trainee is being funded by Strategic Training Solutions to undertake additional typing qualifications to meet her and her employer's needs. Many trainees, who did not achieve well at school, are succeeding in gaining a range of complementary NVQs at level 2 and attaining qualifications up to level 3. Trainees are given verbal feedback after assessment and this is followed up with well-written notes.

23. As well as the company induction, trainees receive a separate and clear induction from the relevant trainer for each NVQ they undertake. The induction is supported by a comprehensive induction booklet, setting out the requirements of the NVQ, together with details and names of the both the internal and external verifiers for that NVQ. This enhances the trainees understanding of their programme and allows them to take ownership of the development of their portfolios of work. Trainees are also given one to one support to assist them in gaining a work placement. This includes help with the writing of curriculum vita or application forms, training on interview techniques, including rôle-play. All trainees involved felt the support had helped them understand the requirements of a system they were unfamiliar with and also, importantly given them confidence in an unfamiliar situation. Trainees are given support when experiencing personal difficulties and there is a helpline for trainees' use when necessary.

24. The initial assessment of trainees is not carried out systematically. Some, particularly those already employed, are not tested to identify their basic skills needs. Trainees are not assessed for their key skills development needs; therefore, key skills training is not planned at the start of their programme. Some matching of trainees' job rôles against the NVQ takes place, but remains neither recorded nor used to identify gaps in the job rôle. The advice given to trainees about suitable programmes or NVQs relies on the judgement of individual staff. There are no guidelines to ensure consistency in identifying the appropriate level or programme. Some trainees are recruited to modern apprenticeships and start at level 3 with no effective assessment of their abilities or job rôle. Reasons for exemption from level 2 qualifications are not recorded. In one case, a trainee is working towards NVQ level 2, when level 3 would be more appropriate.

25. There are isolated examples of the practical application of accrediting some individual trainees' prior learning, but no policy to ensure that prior learning and experience are systematically considered and recorded, resulting in a lack of recognition of past experience or previously acquired skills, including life skills.

Management of training

Grade 3

26. Strategic Training Solutions has a clear management structure, with the centre co-ordinator (also a co-partner of the company) responsible for management of the TEC contract. A senior trainer has recently taken additional responsibility for quality assurance and is responsible for the daily management of assessment and verification procedures. Staff report directly to the senior trainer, who is managed

by the centre co-ordinator. Potential trainees are interviewed by the centre co-ordinator. The appraisal system includes six-monthly reviews followed by an appraisal interview. Staff undertake regular training, linked to individuals' development. The self-assessment report was accurate in identifying many strengths and weaknesses, although additional strengths and weaknesses were also identified. Inspectors awarded the same grade as that awarded by the company in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ staff use TEC targets to direct their work
- ◆ company promotes individual professional development
- ◆ effective formal communications system

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no business plan
- ◆ underdeveloped evaluation of subcontracted training
- ◆ incomplete policies and procedures

27. During the relatively short time for which the company has operated, the centre co-ordinator has established good working relationships with staff; the management style is deemed to be open and fair. Although the company is small, employing relatively few people, it has an effective formal communications system, in addition to the regular informal discussions which occur daily. A staff meeting is held monthly, with all staff expected to attend. Staff are invited to raise agenda items and participate in open discussion. The meetings are minuted, with action points and personnel responsible for addressing problems clearly identified. Appropriate actions are taken before the next meeting. This ensures a fast, efficient response to issues. It is also a forum used to keep staff updated on contractual matters. Staff are well aware of the content of the TEC annual contract. Compliance with contract is a standing item at the staff meeting. Each month, staff receive the update of the company's performance against targets. This is discussed, and staff are encouraged to evaluate the progress of their own group of trainees, where necessary taking appropriate steps to ensure that individual trainees' targets are met on time. This is an effective method of ensuring that trainers contribute to the company's compliance with contract.

28. STS has no business or development plan to inform staff of the future direction of the company. They are, therefore, unaware of the company's projected areas of growth, intended developments and long-term aims and objectives. They are aware of the broad aims only, which are expressed in terms of a percentage of growth in the company's TEC contracts. Job rôles have recently been updated and are clearly defined, but, as there is no overarching company plan, staff have no individual targets to support the development of business. Some policies are in place, however, strategies are underdeveloped; in some cases, there are no policies or procedures.

Although professional development is effective for individual members of staff, the company has no staff development policy or recruitment policy or system procedures, so the team is unable to exchange formally examples of good practice, or agree on standardised methods and working procedures. The lack of a staff development plan results in staff being unable to identify with any key company aims. They cannot see how their experiences contribute towards the development of the company.

29. To date, STS has no monitoring or evaluation procedure to ascertain the quality of its subcontracted provision. There is no process to determine the effectiveness of the training of theory, assessment plans and procedures. Data are collected, but not yet analysed or monitored. STS has recently entered into contractual arrangements with the subcontractor; this is intended to address these issues. However, it is too early to evaluate its effectiveness.

30. There are procedures for appraisal. A review takes place after three months, and staff complete a personal rôle assessment document which forms the basis of appraisal discussions. Staff development is discussed regularly informally, as well as forming part of the appraisal process. Training is provided to ensure that individuals are able to perform their jobs effectively. Training needs also take account of individuals' particular areas of interest and personal views. When job rôles are updated and staff take on new responsibilities, they are given access to training which will equip them for this.

Quality assurance

Grade 3

31. Strategic Training Solutions has been in business for just over a year, with some of its quality systems still being developed. The company has a written quality assurance policy which is made available to staff and employers. It is subject to external audit by the TEC and awarding bodies. Internal verification is shared by three members of staff. Feedback from trainees is collected and evaluated. The self-assessment report was written by the company's centre co-ordinator in consultation with staff members. Feedback from trainees was sought and used. The views of employers and subcontractors were not taken account of. The strengths claimed by STS for this aspect of provision represent contractual compliance. The weaknesses were agreed, but were not all seen as significant. Inspectors found other strengths and weaknesses. Inspectors awarded the same grade as that given by the company in its self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ comprehensive internal verification system
- ◆ company culture of continuous improvement
- ◆ detailed feedback collected from trainees

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ ineffective monitoring of achievement and destinations data
- ◆ no monitoring of employers' views about training
- ◆ no quality checks on individual training plans

32. The company has a thorough and well-organised system for internal verification. A plan for the internal verification of portfolios, based on random sampling, is drawn up at the beginning of each programme to ensure that all candidates and all units are covered. Written feedback is provided for assessors, who address any issues identified, and countersign the feedback sheet to confirm that necessary alterations have taken place. There is also a schedule for the observation of assessors' performance. Internal verifiers complete a monitoring form, on which they comment on issues such as the training environment, the assessor's rapport with the trainee, the learning taking place and the assessment methods used.

33. Feedback to assessors is given verbally, based on the information in the monitoring sheet. So far, only two assessor observations have taken place, and it is too early to say what effect this will have in practice. The self-assessment report acknowledged the lack of procedures to monitor the quality of subcontracted provision. There are plans to further develop the internal verification system, by monitoring the decisions of individual assessors over a period of time and analysing the consistency of different assessors with regard to particular units. However, these practices are not yet under way and it is not possible to comment on how successful they will be.

34. STS collects feedback from trainees at various stages of their programme. Data are analysed and displayed in the form of bar charts, but not used to identify problem areas or improve the quality of training. Although employers are involved in reviews, where possible, and are kept updated about trainees' progress, STS does not formally seek their views about the quality or appropriateness of the training on offer. The company does not monitor the destinations of its trainees or identify trends which might direct or inform provision. The company uses a computerised management-information system provided by the TEC. Training on the system has recently taken place, but is not yet complete; staff are not using it to its full potential.

35. The information in trainees' files is not systematically organised and is, therefore, hard to follow. Although there are individual training plans for all trainees, these are not all fully complete. It is not always obvious from them which programme a trainee is following or when they should be reviewed. The company does not have a system of checking this documentation to ensure that it is all completed to an acceptable standard.

36. The centre co-ordinator and senior trainer are keen to foster a culture of continuous improvement. They impress on staff the importance of delivering a quality product and are continually evaluating and refining their systems and

policies, both in their drive to achieve the Investors in People Standard and out of a determination to build on the strengths of their provision and address the weaknesses.

37. The company views inspection as an aid to its development, and its approach to the self-assessment process was thoughtful. The self-assessment report was accurate in five of the six grades proposed. STS has attempted to make clear the evidence base from which most of its judgements were made. However, judgements are somewhat repetitive in nature, often making the same point in different ways, and several of the strengths claimed represent no more than contractual compliance. Weaknesses are clearly expressed and generally accurate, although some had been addressed by the time of inspection. Action points relate appropriately to the weaknesses identified by STS, but some are not sufficiently precise or focused to lead to an improvement in provision.