



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT AUGUST 1999

Acorn Training Consultants Ltd

SUMMARY

Acorn Training Consultants Ltd offers good training in business administration and retailing and customer service (including distribution). Both sectors have high-quality working environments, well-planned training programmes and good-quality portfolios. All trainees are employed. Individual training sessions are provided for trainees in the workplace. Equal opportunities practices safeguard trainees' rights and responsibilities. The provider has introduced innovative training materials to encourage greater understanding of equal opportunities. However, the promotion and management of equal opportunities within the organisation is informal. Trainees receive strong pastoral and training-related support. Initial assessment is not rigorous and does not address prior learning or key skills. The induction process is well planned. Acorn effectively manages its training programmes. Staff training and development are well planned. Employers clearly understand their roles and responsibilities within the NVQ process. Quality assurance measures are good.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Business administration	2
Retailing & customer service	2

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

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ very effective one-to-one training sessions
- ◆ good-quality portfolios
- ◆ excellent, well-documented trainee support
- ◆ rigorous selection and monitoring of employers
- ◆ very effective monitoring of performance

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of awareness by some trainees of their status or of key skills
- ◆ little formal management or monitoring of equal opportunities
- ◆ lack of formal procedures

INTRODUCTION

1. Acorn Training Consultants Ltd (Acorn) was first established in July 1996 to provide training in the Alfreton district of Derbyshire. It is a private limited company. Based at a single location in Alfreton, Acorn has expanded its geographical base and now extends its training programmes across southern Derbyshire. The focus of the company was originally on the recruitment and placement of trainees, subcontracting its training to a few good training providers. However, as Acorn found it difficult to control standards in subcontracted work, it changed its focus to deliver individually tailored NVQ programmes using its own staff. There are two joint owner/managers of Acorn, supported by two full-time and one part-time members of staff. One partner is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the business, including staffing issues. The other partner is responsible for the quality of the training programmes and curriculum development.

2. Acorn has been delivering government-funded training programmes since it was established. Acorn has contracts with Southern Derbyshire Chamber of Commerce Training and Enterprise (CCTE) which is the co-ordinating TEC for this inspection. There are currently 56 people in training, working towards national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 2 and 3 in business administration and retailing and customer service. Thirty-three trainees are modern apprentices, two are national trainees, and 19 are on other work-based training for young people. Two are receiving training through the New Deal option for 18-24 year olds. For these trainees, Acorn contracts directly with employers on a commercial basis. All of the young people in training with Acorn are employed. One trainee is endorsed as having additional learning needs. None of the young people have disabilities. Acorn also offers training commercially to individuals and employers throughout the county.

3. Acorn has a working agreement with North Derbyshire Chamber of Commerce, which established the provider as a satellite centre. For North Derbyshire Chamber of Commerce, this ensured its multi-sector accreditation. Acorn subcontracts internal verification and warehousing training to North Derbyshire Chamber of Commerce. Most off-the-job training is carried out on employers' premises on a one-to-one basis by Acorn's training staff.

4. Acorn's operating office is in Alfreton, in the Amber Valley district of Derbyshire which is a predominantly rural county. The main industries in Amber Valley are predominantly textiles and pottery manufacturing and light engineering. There are a few large employers in the local area, some of which have been badly affected by large-scale redundancies. This has had an effect on the economic wealth of the communities. There are still large numbers of employers with between one and 50 employees. Shops, pubs, restaurants and garages form the second largest sector in Amber Valley, while the third sector consists of large public organisations such as the local hospital, further education college and local

borough council. Minority ethnic groups in the Amber Valley account for less than 0.6 per cent of the population.

5. There is a significant number of people with relatively low incomes in the rural areas who face a range of barriers to joining the labour market, particularly access to transport. Additionally, there are significant areas of disadvantage in the urban centres of Alfreton and Ripley. Unemployment in Derbyshire is 4.3 per cent, compared with the national average of 5.3 per cent. Alfreton has an unemployment rate of 3.5 per cent, significantly lower than the national average.

6. In 1998, 3.5 per cent of school leavers entered work-based training in South Derbyshire. However, this figure excludes those on modern apprenticeships. Twenty-three per cent of school leavers went into further education. Thirty-seven per cent entered sixth forms. In 1998, the percentage of school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 48 per cent, compared with the national average of 46.3 per cent.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

7. Acorn began preparing for self-assessment in January 1998. A partner attended training organised by Southern Derbyshire CCTE. This member of staff then fed back to colleagues at Acorn, in order to help them understand and contribute towards the preparation of the different report sections. All of the staff carried out self-assessment for their own occupational areas and generic areas. An action plan was drawn up and implemented up to the end of the 1998-99 contractual year. At this point, there was little input from trainees and employers. The second cycle of self-assessment began in April 1999, following the same format. The self-assessment report was finalised at the end of May 1999. An action plan was drawn up to address the issues raised in the self-assessment report. This plan has been accepted by all staff and is now being implemented.

8. A team of three inspectors spent a total of nine days at Acorn in August 1999. Inspectors visited 14 employers and interviewed 13 workplace supervisors. They interviewed 22 trainees. Five staff and one internal verifier from North Derbyshire CCTE were interviewed. Inspectors examined a range of documentary evidence, including 17 NVQ portfolios and 25 trainees' files, together with assessment and review documents, and internal and external verifiers' reports. Policies and procedures, marketing information and a wide range of performance and occupancy data were also examined. There were some opportunities to observe training, assessment and induction. Three training sessions were observed and these are detailed below.

Grades awarded to instruction sessions

	GRADE 1	GRADE 2	GRADE 3	GRADE 4	GRADE 5	TOTAL
Business administration		2				2
Retailing & customer service		1				1
Total	0	3	0	0	0	3

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Business administration

Grade 2

9. There are 29 trainees on business administration programmes. Fifteen are modern apprentices, two are national trainees and 12 are following other NVQ programmes that do not include key skills. Twenty-seven trainees are working to NVQ level 2, and two to level 3 in administration. Trainees can also progress to level 4 with Acorn. All trainees are employed. Employers include graphics companies, solicitors and manufacturers. Acorn helps 80 per cent of trainees find employment. The other 20 per cent of trainees are already employed when they begin their programme. One-to-one training is given in the workplace by a trainer. Skills not gained in the workplace are delivered in the working environment of

Acorn's office. Trainees also attend workshops held at Acorn's premises, which cover topics such as telephone techniques and helping people with disabilities. Trainees are able to take additional qualifications in computer literacy and keyboarding skills. About 50 per cent of trainees also take a customer service NVQ when they have completed an administration NVQ. Trainees are visited every two weeks by their trainer who carries out training and assessment. Each trainee is also allocated a training manager. The training manager meets the trainee and his or her supervisor every 12 weeks to review their progress at work. Inspectors agreed with the grade given by Acorn.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ high level of involvement by employers in the NVQ process
- ◆ creative and individual one-to-one training
- ◆ excellent range of evidence in portfolios
- ◆ effective and frequent visits to trainees in the workplace

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some poor understanding and integration of key skills
- ◆ trainees unaware of NVQ status

GOOD PRACTICE

Acorn offers creative and individual training sessions. Computer learning materials are adapted at each visit to include the names of the trainee and employer. The use of laptop computers and this personalised training programme enhance the training experience. All trainees enjoy these innovative training sessions.

10. All employers are highly committed to the NVQ process and praise the standard of Acorn's training. One-to-one training sessions are carried out in the workplace and are focused on the individual trainee's needs. Employers and trainees find the induction very useful, as it is interactive; the employer is involved in the training process from the induction. Tasks that trainees complete as part of their induction pack help them to understand their NVQ and the employer's workplace. The induction has been used to develop better working practices within employers' premises, as it includes, for example, health and safety policies. All trainees are given time at work to build up their portfolios and are allowed to attend workshops. Supervisors and employers encourage trainees to progress in their training and develop their careers. There is a good rapport between employers, trainees and the provider.

11. Training is tailored to suit trainees and employers' needs. Trainees are motivated and enjoy their programmes. They are allocated a trainer who visits them at least every two weeks in the workplace. Although the training material is standardised across the occupational sector, the trainer customises the examples to incorporate the real-life situation of the employer and the trainee. Tasks are usually done using a laptop computer, which the trainer takes into the workplace. Each trainee's work is kept on his or her own disk. The use of the laptop helps to develop trainees' information-technology skills. Trainees all enjoy doing the tasks, including the exercises to improve their spelling and grammar. The quality of tuition is good. Workshops held at Acorn's premises give trainees the opportunity to meet each other and to share their experiences.

12. Trainees are given positive and constructive feedback about their progress. Trainers use clear action plans and set realistic, but challenging, goals every time they visit trainees. The trainee, trainer and training manager keep copies of these action plans. If the supervisor is not present, the trainer leaves them a report which summarises trainees' achievements and highlights any issues. Additionally, the training manager visits trainees and their supervisors every 12 weeks and discusses trainees' progress and development. The training manager ensures that any issues raised by the trainee, trainer or supervisor are addressed immediately.

13. Trainees' portfolios contain a wide range of good-quality evidence, including photographs, witness testimonies, observations, personal statements and work products. The structure of the portfolio and the relevance of its contents are clearly understood by trainees. All trainees manage their portfolios effectively. Trainees are encouraged to cross-reference evidence across units and NVQs. There is no unnecessary duplication of work.

14. There is a lack of external data to compare achievement and retention rates at a local level. However, there has been a steady increase in the number of trainees achieving an NVQ and of trainees completing their programmes. This year-on-year improvement has resulted in 57 per cent of leavers achieving an NVQ and 71 per cent of leavers achieving a job. These figures only relate to youth trainees on other work-based programmes. None of the modern apprentices or national trainees has yet completed their programmes, so figures are not available for them.

15. Some trainees are not certain of their status on their programmes. Many trainees on modern apprenticeships and national traineeships do not understand their full NVQ programme with key skills. Trainees at level 2 have no understanding of what key skills are or the impact of key skills on their future life and career development. Most level 2 administration trainees match evidence from their portfolio to that required for key skills when their NVQ is completed. The provider has recently changed the induction pack to include an introduction to key skills and has made attempts to improve key skills assessment to make it more accessible for trainees. Staff have undertaken training in key skills units in order to help trainees.

Retailing & customer service

Grade 2

16. There are 18 modern apprentices, seven youth trainees and two New Deal trainees in this sector. Twenty-three trainees are working towards NVQ levels 2 and 3 in customer service. Four trainees are working towards NVQ level 2 in distribution. During the period 1998-99, there have been 18 trainees starting and four early leavers. All trainees are employed. Acorn operates an innovative style of training through one-to-one sessions at trainees' workplaces. It also provides training workshops in Alfreton for trainees to increase their employability skills. All staff have assessment qualifications and relevant occupational backgrounds.

Employers range from small- to medium-sized companies. Inspectors awarded a higher grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ excellent facilities and resources at work placements
- ◆ targets set at fortnightly intervals
- ◆ good use of one-to-one training activities
- ◆ high achievement rates

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ weak communication links in distribution programme
- ◆ trainees unaware of their completion dates

GOOD PRACTICE

There are excellent facilities and resources at work placements. One organisation is so supportive of its trainee that a computer was purchased to complement the literacy and numeracy training programme required. This was discussed and subsequently arranged by Acorn.

17. The work placements for customer service trainees all offer good opportunities for trainees to achieve their qualification. They are small- to medium-sized organisations with a positive approach to training. In order to ensure that there is an appropriate learning environment for the trainees, Acorn carefully vets all employers. Many employers are able to rotate trainees in a variety of working roles to ensure that evidence is gained for the NVQ. All employers are thoroughly involved in the training and have a good knowledge of the NVQ. All trainees are carefully matched to the work placement and are employed from the start of their training programme. In cases where trainees have been unable to continue with one employer, Acorn has always found alternative employment for the trainee. Most of the trainees have been with the same employer since starting their training.

18. Trainees are offered a variety of activities to help them to gather evidence for the NVQ. All trainees are highly motivated and enjoy their work and training. They are all very supportive of Acorn and feel that they have received excellent support, advice and guidance on their programme. Trainees understand the NVQ and its requirements exceptionally well. Acorn's staff carefully introduce the qualification to trainees at induction. This enables the trainees to achieve units soon after starting the programme, which also helps to maintain their motivation. The trainer carefully matches trainees' experiences at work to the NVQ standards.

19. Training staff plan assessments with trainees on a fortnightly basis. At each visit, they agree with the trainee the units to be assessed. This information is then recorded, setting goals and detailing evidence to be obtained before the next visit. This ensures that trainees always know what is required for the qualification on very short timescales. Work-based supervisors are also involved in this process. The one-to-one training sessions are customised to meet the individual needs of the trainees. Trainees work at a pace which is suitable for their learning style and the work environment. However, trainees are not aware of their overall progress to date. They cannot state which units have been achieved and the final expected completion date.

20. Achievement rates are high. Statistics for 1998-99 show that there are 71 NVQs out of 100 leavers gained on the modern apprenticeship programme, and 79 NVQs out of 100 leavers on other youth training programmes. There are few data available from external sources to compare achievement rates with other local providers.

21. The distribution-training programme is subcontracted to an external organisation. Although this only affects four trainees, communication links are not clear. There are regular internal verification meetings between Acorn and some external staff, but these do not often involve the trainer in this area. Acorn is aware that the quality of the distribution-training programme is not rigorously monitored and this was identified in the self-assessment report.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 3

22. Acorn has an equal opportunities policy which meets TEC requirements. There is a reference to equal opportunities in subcontractors and employers' agreements. The induction process for trainees includes a reference to equal opportunities. Less than 1 per cent of the Amber Valley district's population comes from a minority ethnic group. Acorn aims to recruit 2 per cent of minority ethnic trainees to its programmes as part of its contractual performance indicators from the TEC. There are currently three trainees from minority ethnic groups on the programme, out of a total of 56 trainees. There are no trainees with disabilities on the programme. However, there are trainees with specific learning difficulties who have not had these difficulties recorded on their contractual forms. There is access for people with mobility problems at Acorn's premises. The grade awarded by inspectors is the same as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good response by staff to equal opportunities issues
- ◆ innovative use of equal opportunities training materials
- ◆ thorough knowledge of harassment and grievance procedures by all trainees

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no formal management or monitoring of equal opportunities
- ◆ selection procedures do not ensure equality of opportunity

23. A thorough induction pack ensures that all trainees are aware of equal opportunities. All trainees have a good understanding of grievance and harassment procedures. The provider has supported individual trainees in several instances in the workplace where grievance and harassment procedures have been invoked.

24. Equal opportunities issues are dealt with promptly and effectively. Some trainees have experienced personal problems of a sensitive nature and staff at Acorn have dealt with these in a prompt and professional manner. One case of sexual harassment was dealt with swiftly. Acorn has often held discussions with the families of trainees in order to support trainees with learning difficulties or personal problems. All such cases are clearly recorded in a sensitive manner in trainees' files.

25. Acorn effectively monitors the equal opportunities practices of employers. Some are rejected as not suitable if they do not meet the required standards in relation to equality of opportunity. One employer specifically requested a female trainee for a receptionist's role. Staff at Acorn were able to change this specification after explaining the requirements of the equal opportunities policy. However, the equal opportunities policy is not routinely given to employers. It is briefly mentioned in the training terms and conditions when a new trainee starts employment.

26. Acorn has recently developed an equal opportunities training package involving a role-play exercise allowing trainees to examine their own prejudices, which is now integrated into mainstream training. Training sessions have been held, which include this new initiative. The feedback from the trainees is extremely positive. Several training workshops have also been held for trainees to discuss dealing with people with disabilities.

27. Since January 1998, there has been a nominated person within the company who has undertaken the role of equal opportunities adviser. This nominee has attended external training courses on racial discrimination and current legislation. This information is then made available to all staff at the centre. There is however, no formal procedure for disseminating this information or including it into the equal opportunities policy. It is discussed at team meetings, but not followed through in a systematic manner.

28. There are no formal management or monitoring procedures for equal opportunities issues. Although all staff are familiar with equal opportunities issues, there is no structured management process which allows monitoring to be effective. Data are collected to fulfill contractual requirements, but little is done to examine trends or past performance in this area. There is little promotional literature which challenges stereotypical roles. Acorn has recently translated literature into Punjabi but it is new and has not yet been sent to the relevant agencies.

29. The selection procedure for staff and trainees lacks rigour. There are no clear procedures for selection, nor is a consistent approach used. For trainees who complete an initial assessment at interview, there are no comparisons made in order to establish the assessment as a pass or fail rate.

Trainee support

Grade 2

30. Recruitment of trainees is usually by referral from the careers service or direct from employers. New trainees and work placements are also derived from private recommendation by previous clients of Acorn. The provider operates a selection procedure for new entrants. Acceptance onto a programme is based on an initial interview with both the provider and the employer. The provider conducts a basic skills assessment for all young people on TEC training programmes. All trainees have an induction, covering their rights and responsibilities and health and safety. In addition, all trainees receive a separate induction to their NVQ programme by the trainer. All trainees are employed. Trainers visit trainees to conduct one-to-one training sessions in the workplace. A different member of staff is responsible for all progress review meetings. Trainees are able to access off-the-job training workshops within Acorn's centre at Alfreton. All training staff have relevant qualifications and NVQ assessor awards. The grade awarded by inspectors is the same as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ well-planned, interactive induction
- ◆ excellent, well-documented trainee support
- ◆ additional training offered to meet trainees' requirements
- ◆ good progression routes for trainees

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ initial assessment procedures vary between trainees

31. Acorn ensures that every trainee is given a work placement and carefully matches trainees with employers. Acorn undertakes basic skills assessments for all youth trainees on all training programmes. It has tried a number of initial assessment tests in recent months, varying from a brief non-standard test for numeracy and literacy to a thorough skills scan. A useful key skills test has been piloted, but this has not been developed fully or implemented into the entry procedures. Although there is no formal accreditation of prior learning or experience at entry, there are instances where this has been done at an early stage in the training programme. New Deal trainees are generally referred after an informal initial assessment by Employment Service staff. Results of initial assessment are not given to trainees or used to form an individual training plan.

32. Induction is well planned and readily recalled by all trainees. It is a two-part process. Part one is completed in the workplace as an introduction to the terms and conditions of the training programme. This clearly outlines the roles and responsibilities of the trainee, the employer and the provider. Policies and procedures are discussed at this stage. Part two of the induction is a one-to-one interview between the trainee and trainer to introduce the qualification and its requirements. An NVQ induction workbook is used to introduce a series of

interactive activities between the trainee and the employer. The activities include a health and safety awareness project, understanding employers' policies and other research tasks. Trainees enjoy the induction process and demonstrate an in-depth understanding of the workplace and the NVQ. Furthermore, the completed induction workbook provides trainees with evidence which they are encouraged to use in their new portfolios.

33. Trainees benefit from frequent contact with their trainer. They are visited on a very frequent basis, most visits being scheduled on a two-weekly rota. During the visits, trainers offer training on a one-to-one basis, and complete an NVQ progress document. This document allows trainees, employers and the training advisor to comment on progress towards the NVQ. All trainees have the home telephone number of their trainer to use, if required, out of working hours. For some trainees, out-of-hours visits have been made to help them with aspects of the training programme. A different member of staff conducts pastoral review visits to the workplace every 10 to 12 weeks. These visits are conducted on a four- to six-weekly basis for trainees requiring additional support for learning needs. During this review visit, trainees are offered personal guidance and support to ensure their continued commitment and motivation to the training programme. All individual support needs are clearly recorded.

34. Trainees with personal or learning-related problems receive extra support from Acorn. For example, trainees with dyslexia receive extra help with literacy. In other instances, the provider works with the employer to overcome problems in the workplace. For example, one young person had difficulty carrying out work-related tasks on time. Acorn dealt with this by developing a customised time-management programme for the trainee. Other trainees receive additional training in appropriate areas such as telephone techniques, health and safety, and information-technology skills. These courses are certificated and awarded to the trainee.

35. All trainees are encouraged to progress to national traineeships or modern apprenticeships with the provider. Trainees are able to undertake additional NVQs to complement their original training programme. Many progress from NVQ level 2 to level 3 at Acorn. Acorn's staff give objective careers advice to those trainees who have completed their training programme. For example, some trainees have moved into higher or further education courses with support from Acorn.

Management of training

Grade 2

36. Acorn is currently in its third year of operation. The management structure consists of two owner/managers supported by two full-time and one part-time members of staff. One partner is responsible for training, curriculum development and quality assurance. The other is responsible for operations, staffing and business development. The staff are jointly responsible for the delivery of training, assessment and reviews. Internal verification and the delivery of distribution training are subcontracted to a local organisation. Acorn insists that all assessors

hold training and development lead body assessor awards. Staff meet regularly in team, assessor/trainer and internal verification meetings. They work together to contribute to the future direction of the organisation. Acorn uses a computerised management system from the TEC to provide data on its training programmes and to track trainees through their training. It also has its own self-developed tracking system. Acorn has just been accredited with an Investors in People Standard. The grade awarded by inspectors is the same as that given by Acorn.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ rigorous selection and monitoring of employers
- ◆ good staff training and development
- ◆ very effective team approach
- ◆ good co-ordination between on- and off-the-job training

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ underdeveloped management-information system

37. Managers at Acorn have clear, stated objectives to deliver high-quality training programmes. They decided on this strategy soon after establishing the business in July 1996 and have since worked closely with the staff to achieve a process of continuous improvement. All staff, including the owners, have clear roles and responsibilities. Training operations are effectively managed and all staff are actively involved and understand what is happening. The careful and systematic approach to management is demonstrated in the team's agendas and minutes of meetings over the past three years. Team meetings, assessor/trainer and internal verification meetings all ensure that there are clear and open lines of communication both internally and externally with subcontractors.

38. Staff training and development is well developed. All staff participate in a training and development programme which provides a good framework for their progression. All staff are able to achieve qualifications which meet the business needs of the organisation. Good use is made of external courses. For example, a member of staff is currently attending a key skills practitioner course, while others have achieved different key skills units. This has had a direct benefit on the introduction and integration of key skills across both occupational sectors. Recruitment and appraisal systems are poorly documented. However, they are appropriate to the size of the organisation.

39. Acorn has excellent working relationships with employers. It ensures that employers are rigorously selected to offer the best training environment for its trainees. The training manager visits potential employers, who have often approached Acorn through word-of-mouth recommendation. Employers are carefully vetted for health and safety, equal opportunities and other legislation. Some employers are rejected if there are areas for concern. For example, one employer did not pay a reasonable rate for the position offered to a trainee. Acorn

insists that trainees are paid the legal minimum wage, and that those below the age of eighteen are paid well above the minimum training rate.

40. Acorn carefully matches trainees with employers. Staff interview potential trainees and assess their ability. The employer then interviews a small selection of trainees and makes a choice. All employers are completely involved in the training programme of their new employee. The agreement between the employer, provider and trainee is clearly recorded in the training terms and conditions. There is good co-ordination between on- and off-the-job training. Despite these excellent working relationships, the provider does not ensure that employers are in possession of its policies in respect of equal opportunities and quality assurance.

41. Acorn has a computerised trainee tracking system to meet the contractual requirements of the TEC. It has also developed a separate system. Wall charts are produced to enable each trainer to track and monitor trainees' progress. However, the system is not yet fully developed. It does not give a full picture of each trainee's progress and is not yet a fully effective management tool.

Quality assurance

Grade 2

42. Acorn has a quality assurance policy which meets all awarding body requirements. There is a clear meeting structure and all meetings are formally minuted. All the team receive minutes of meetings. There are no formal documented procedures for dealing with complaints or recording interviews with trainees leaving the programme. Trainees are given questionnaires in order to evaluate their training experiences after induction, on completion of the first two units and at the end of their programme. Employers are asked to complete a questionnaire half way through the trainees' programmes. New training materials and workshops are also evaluated. All team members were involved in writing the self-assessment report. The self-assessment report was an honest attempt to identify strengths and weaknesses, but inspectors identified additional strengths and weaknesses. The grade awarded by inspectors for quality assurance is higher than that given by Acorn.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ all staff contribute to continuous improvement
- ◆ regular exchange of good practice
- ◆ rigorous performance monitoring

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some feedback and evaluation procedures not fully established
- ◆ lack of formal procedures in some areas

43. Acorn is constantly reviewing and improving its provision. It has a well-developed and rigorous three-tier meeting structure. Weekly briefings are held at

which the training manager gives feedback on discussions with trainees, and employers and trainees' progress is discussed. Monthly team meetings are held at which administration, support and management issues are addressed. Action plans are reviewed at these meetings. Assessors and the internal verifier for administration and customer service also meet on a monthly basis. The assessor and internal verifier for warehousing do not attend. Quality assurance issues relating to training and assessment are discussed at these meetings. Six-monthly meetings are held with a partner organisation at which both organisations' assessors and internal verifiers share good practice and keep each other updated. Meetings are well minuted. Within the team there is open and free exchange of ideas and good practice.

44. There is a rigorous internal verification system for administration and customer service. The internal verifier observes each trainer every two months, assessing trainees in the workplace. Portfolios are sampled as they are being built and when they are completed. All trainees' work is sampled. External verifiers' reports for key skills and NVQs are good and required no action points. Team members also moderate each other's work and have a good mentoring system, which helps to train staff and ensure consistency.

45. Acorn rigorously and effectively monitors its performance. It aims to achieve 95 per cent of the key performance indicators set out in its TEC contract. Targets set for staff are shown on a wall chart and understood by all the team. The wall chart constantly shows staff how they are performing against their contract. Staff are paid a small bonus for achieving their targets. Monthly targets in terms of NVQs and jobs achieved and trainees' progress are monitored closely. Hourly rates are calculated and how long a member of staff spends with a trainee is monitored. The length of time it takes for trainees to achieve units is regulated. Acorn plans for trainees to complete an element of their NVQ each time the trainer visits. Action is taken if targets are not being met. If trainees are not achieving, they may be allocated another trainer or a different training area or time.

46. Acorn is keen to seek feedback from trainees and employers and places the learning experience at the centre of its quality-assurance system. When the trainer and the training manager visit the workplace they discuss trainees' progress and employers' satisfaction with the trainee. Any issues raised by the trainee, trainer or supervisor are responded to promptly. Acorn is a small company and changes are implemented quickly.

47. Trainees are regularly asked to evaluate the training and materials they receive. Using the results of questionnaires circulated last year, Acorn responded to negative comments. The process of reviewing these questionnaires has been developed recently to analyse and evaluate trainees and employers' feedback. The process is not yet established or used to inform long-term decision-making. Acorn is considering how a higher response rate can be achieved.

48. Although all members of the team have their own master copies of material used for NVQs, there is a lack of clearly recorded procedures for some areas.



There are no written procedures for complaints or for dealing with trainees who leave their programmes before completing them.