



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT MAY 2000

Focus Training Plymouth

SUMMARY

Focus Training (Plymouth) provides effective training for young trainees in retailing and customer service. Trainees are employed in a variety of companies throughout Devon and Cornwall. Training is carried out by employers at work and Focus Training assessors visit them frequently to carry out assessment and plan the collection of portfolio evidence. Trainees receive good guidance from assessors but employers are insufficiently involved in their progress reviews. Equal opportunities are not actively promoted to employers or to trainees. Management of training and quality assurance arrangements are satisfactory. The company has been in operation just over one year and many of the systems and procedures are still being developed.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Retailing & customer service	2

GENERIC AREAS	GRADE
Equal opportunities	4
Trainee support	3
Management of training	3
Quality assurance	3

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ good assessment planning
- ◆ effective key skills integration by trainees
- ◆ accessible and effective support arrangements
- ◆ effective and inclusive management style
- ◆ rigorous internal verification system

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ inadequate target setting
- ◆ no initial assessment of basic & key skills
- ◆ no active promotion of equal opportunities
- ◆ training not managed effectively
- ◆ no use of data in decision making

INTRODUCTION

1. Focus Training was established in March 1999 by a group of eight partners. The company has an office near Plymouth and provides work-based training for young people throughout Devon and Cornwall. All the trainees are employed and work in a variety of companies from national retail outlets to small family run enterprises. There are 11 employees in the company; all are qualified and are experienced in a range of retail and customer service environments.

2. Focus Training has a contract with Prosper Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) to provide training in the occupational areas of business administration and retailing and customer service. Focus Training also has a contract with Prosper TEC to deliver the employment and full time education and training options for the New Deal in Cornwall. At the time of inspection there were no New Deal clients in training. The company also has a small number of commercial clients. At the time of inspection there were 164 trainees of whom 52 were modern apprentices, 80 were national trainees and 32 were undergoing other work-based training programmes for young people. There were 10 business administration trainees: this area was not inspected because of the low number of trainees.

3. Unemployment in Devon & Cornwall is generally low. In March 2000 it was 2.9 per cent compared with a national average of 3.9 per cent. There are, however, some areas of rural deprivation in Cornwall where the unemployment rates are higher. In 1999, the proportion of school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 51.6 per cent in Cornwall and 48.4 per cent in Devon, compared with the national average of 47.9 per cent. In Devon and Cornwall the proportion of the population from minority ethnic groups is less than 1 per cent.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

4. The self-assessment report produced for the inspection was Focus Training's first report. The staff held a brainstorming session to identify strengths and weaknesses. Three staff co-ordinated the preparation of the report and discussed it with other staff at the monthly meetings. The report separated the seven aspects identified in *Raising the Standard* for each occupational area rather than combining the first three aspects into occupational areas and reporting on the four generic aspects for the whole organisation. Many of the strengths identified were repeated in more than one section of the report and some were considered to be no more than normal practice. Inspectors agreed with the grades given in the self-assessment report for the occupational area and trainee support. In equal opportunities, management of training and quality assurance additional weaknesses were found and lower grades awarded

5. A team of four inspectors spent a total of 12 days at Focus Training in May 2000. The inspectors visited 16 employers in Devon and Cornwall and interviewed 25 trainees and 12 work-based supervisors or managers. Seventeen interviews were conducted with staff. Inspectors examined trainees' work, assessment records, portfolios and files. Other paperwork examined included the TEC contract, quality manual and procedures manual, minutes of meetings, trainee data, and internal and external verification reports. The inspectors observed two assessments, and three reviews.

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Retailing & customer service

Grade 2

6. There is a total of 154 trainees: 49 are modern apprentices, 76 are national trainees and 29 are work-based youth trainees. Trainees are working towards a variety of NVQs, with 70 on retail operations, 81 on customer service, two on sales and one on distribution and warehousing. Two work-based trainees are working towards retail operations NVQs at level 4 and the remainder are working towards NVQs at levels 2 or 3. Employers provide the majority of training but Focus Training staff provide additional coaching when required. All assessment is carried at work by Focus Training staff. The assessors are occupationally experienced and hold various training and development qualifications. Some staff are qualified key skills assessors while others are working towards key skills qualifications. All trainees are employed and work in a variety of companies. Between 1999 and 2000, 77 per cent of work-based youth trainees achieved their qualifications, 58 per cent of national trainees achieved their awards and 30 per cent of modern apprentices completed all elements of their training programmes. The self-assessment report identified a number of strengths, some of which are

considered to be no more than normal practice. Inspectors identified additional strengths and awarded the same grade as that proposed in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effective key skills integration
- ◆ good use of assessment planning
- ◆ flexible arrangement to meet employer needs

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ inadequate review processes
- ◆ few learning resources

7. Most trainees have a clear understanding of both their occupational qualification and the key skills units which they are working towards. At the start of the training programmes assessors help trainees to gain an understanding of evidence collection and cross-referencing for assessment. Trainees are encouraged to cross-reference evidence of occupational and key skills units simultaneously. The trainees are well motivated and produce good quality portfolios. Trainees, most of whom also work towards key skills units, make particularly good progress towards achieving their qualifications. Employers provide trainees with the opportunity to complete additional NVQs, for example, two trainees are working toward NVQs at level 4 in retail operations.

8. Assessors visit trainees fortnightly, or more frequently if necessary. On each visit assessors give their trainees good-quality verbal and written feedback on their assessment and they agree an action plan for the next visit. These action plans specify the activities and evidence collection that the trainee should complete before the next assessor visit. Any targets that have not been achieved are discussed with the trainee and included in a new action plan. This assessment planning process gives trainees a structured approach to evidence collection. It particularly benefits trainees without previous experience of NVQs. The action plans help assessors to monitor trainees' progress closely.

9. Focus Training does not provide any structured off-the-job training. Employers provide most of the training. The quality and availability of training varies considerably between employers. Where necessary assessors coach trainees to develop their knowledge and understanding. Focus Training has some learning resources that assessors can use when coaching but these are not issued to trainees systematically. The lack of ready access to learning resources mainly affects trainees employed in small retail outlets. The smaller employers often have no company guidance available on legislative and regulatory requirements. Focus Training has recently lent portable computers to those trainees without other access to computers so that they can achieve their key skills units.

10. An assessor reviews trainees' progress every four-to-six weeks. These reviews fail to identify the progress that trainees are making towards the achievement of their qualifications. As a result, many trainees have a poor understanding of how long it will take for them to achieve their NVQs. The company requires assessors to forecast qualification completion dates but the lack of an emphasis on reviewing trainee progress limits their ability to forecast completion.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 4

11. Focus Training has an equal opportunities policy which complies with the TEC contract. Equal opportunities data are collected monthly in accordance with TEC requirements. Separate complaints and grievance procedures are issues to trainees at induction. Agreements between Focus Training and the employers contain an equal opportunities clause. Equal opportunities are discussed with trainees during the six-weekly reviews. There are currently 67 men and 97 women on the programme: 16 trainees have disabilities or health problems. There are currently no people from minority ethnic groups on the programme. The self-assessment report identified several strengths, which were considered by inspectors to be normal practice. The inspectors identified additional weaknesses. The grade awarded was lower than that proposed in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good staff appreciation of equal opportunities

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient promotion of equal opportunities
- ◆ employers' equal opportunities inadequately managed
- ◆ data not used to influence planning

12. Focus Training's staff have a good level of awareness of equal opportunities issues. The assessors have a good range of individual skills and experience. This allows them to develop effective relationships with their trainees. All new staff undergo training and complete a workbook designed to raise awareness and extend their knowledge of equal opportunities law and practice. Training in equal opportunities is not part of the planned staff development programme. Staff were recently asked to complete a questionnaire on their awareness of equal opportunities issues.

13. The company does not actively promote its approach to equal opportunities. There is no strategy to increase the recruitment of people from disadvantaged and

minority groups. The current marketing materials include an information pack for employers outlining the range of qualifications available but there is no mention of equal opportunities or what employers' responsibilities are in this area. There are no marketing materials or general information currently available for potential trainees. Employers sign an agreement stating whether or not they have their own, monitored, equal opportunities policy. Employers who do not have their own policy are given a copy of Focus Training's policy. Two employers interviewed by inspectors specified a preference to recruiting trainees of a specific gender. Some trainees were unaware of their employer's or Focus Training's equal opportunities policies or codes of practice. During the six-weekly reviews, assessors discuss equal opportunities with trainees. A box is ticked to indicate this but there are no records of the topics discussed. There are no procedures for reviews or guidance notes to ensure that assessors promote equal opportunities and raise trainees' awareness.

14. Focus Training has an equal opportunities policy and code of practice with guidelines for staff. There is no separate policy or code of practice for trainees. There are no policies or procedures on harassment or bullying. The policy on special needs is inaccurate and needs updating. It refers to assessment for basic skills, which is not carried out by the company. The policies and procedures are not monitored on a systematic basis. Equal opportunities data are not analysed or used to inform future planning. The company is reviewing its equal opportunities policies, codes and procedures in line with all its other policies.

Trainee support

Grade 3

15. All trainees are employed before they start on their training programmes. Focus Training recruits most trainees by personal recommendations and through its strong relationship with employers. Most employers refer their new staff to Focus Training if they are interested in working towards relevant qualifications. Focus Training carries out an induction with the trainees and completes a checklist that covers health and safety issues. Individual training plans are prepared and prior achievements are taken into account. Trainees discuss their training agreements with their assessors and sign and keep a copy of the plan which covers trainees' terms and conditions and contains information on their rights. Trainees' progress is reviewed every four to six weeks. Many employers promote the individual achievement of trainees in staff newspapers and by making presentations. Focus Training has rewarded successful trainees with gift vouchers. Two trainees were highly commended in the 'Achiever of the Year' awards run by the local TEC. At the time of inspection 45 per cent of trainees are working towards their second and in some cases third or fourth qualification. Inspectors agreed with most of the strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report. Inspectors awarded the same grade as that proposed in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good guidance from well qualified staff
- ◆ accessible and effective support arrangements

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no initial assessment of basic or key skills
- ◆ insufficient involvement by employers in the review process
- ◆ no records of additional support for trainees

GOOD PRACTICE

An assessor allows trainees to visit her house in the evenings to work on their portfolios and use a computer. This enables them to type up their work and produce evidence for their key skills assessment. It has given trainees who work in busy retail environments the support and resources to produce good quality portfolios.

16. Focus Training offers good guidance for both employers and trainees. The organisation helps employers to find trainees by placing advertisements in local papers, talking to the career service and undertaking first interviews. All potential trainees are given relevant, accurate and objective guidance on the opportunities available. This guidance often involves discussion with employers and parents. Focus Training's assessors are experienced in delivering NVQ programmes at different levels and continue to advise trainees on the best routes for progression. Many trainees go on to take further qualifications. Some trainees, for example, are given the opportunity to take a fork-truck driving course.

17. Assessors visit trainees at least fortnightly to assess them at work. This gives trainees regular opportunities to discuss their progress and to raise any other additional support issues. These frequent visits to employer's premises facilitate good communication with both employers and trainees and have helped to create strong working relationships. Assessors encourage trainees to contact them outside the planned visits and are able to alter their timetables to accommodate trainees' needs for assessment and support. Assessors give trainees their mobile and home phone numbers and the Focus Training office keeps weekly schedules of where the assessors are. If trainees have any issues or concerns they are able to get a quick response.

18. When training starts, assessors take account of any prior learning and experience the trainee may have. There is, however, no initial assessment of a trainee's basic skills and additional support needs are identified more by chance than from a systematic process. Similarly trainee needs relating to key skills are not identified at the beginning of the training programme. Trainees conduct a self-assessment against each of the elements in the training programme and this is discussed with their managers and assessors. The self-assessment helps trainees to decide how they are going to provide assessment evidence for their qualifications but it does not identify specific training needs or any additional support that will be required. Focus Training is developing a new initial assessment package to identify training needs and additional support requirements.

19. Trainees have a review with their assessor every six weeks. Employers are not often involved in the review process and are unable to influence the trainee's progress or agree actions. Assessor and trainee discuss progress, any personal or developmental issues, and issues relating to health and safety and equal

opportunities. The assessor checks that trainees are aware of the appeals procedure and internal verification process. Most employers sign the review form after the trainee and assessor have completed the review but they do not add comments. Many reviews lack detail and contain bland statements. Although frequent contact encourages good communication, it does not ensure participation or involvement by employers in the decision-making and planning of the NVQ programme.

20. Trainees in need of additional support receive practical help from assessors and individual workplace managers, but this is not formally recorded. This can cause problems when assessors or key staff move or leave.

Management of training

Grade 3

21. Focus Training is owned by eight partners who are all employees of the business. There is a clearly defined organisational structure. The operations manager has overall responsibility for day-to-day operations and is supported by a team of 10 employees. There are two internal verifiers who are also assessors, five assessors, one trainee assessor and two part-time administrators. Each assessor looks after a group of trainees within a geographical area. The partners meet monthly to discuss various issues including the business plan, finances, marketing and self-assessment. There is also a monthly quality meeting. The administrators maintain the trainees' files and the variety of management information systems that are used by the staff. During its first year of operation, Focus Training has achieved the Investors in People award. Policies and procedures cover some aspects of the work but are not comprehensive. Staff appraisal takes place every six months and is linked to personal and organisational goals. The self-assessment report identified most of the strengths though some were considered to be no more than normal practice. Inspectors identified additional weaknesses and awarded a lower grade than that proposed in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ inclusive management style
- ◆ good internal communications
- ◆ well-structured staff training and development

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ some responsibilities not clearly defined
- ◆ some procedures not recorded
- ◆ training not managed effectively
- ◆ data systems not fully developed

22. The organisation structure is clearly defined and all staff are aware of each other's roles and responsibilities. The staff are mutually supportive. The operations manager encourages open debate and sharing of information. The partners meet monthly to discuss the performance of the business and review its plans. Staff attend a monthly quality meeting where the company's policies and procedures are openly discussed. The administration staff are included in part of the meeting to raise any issues relating to the records, files and management information systems they maintain. In addition to the two formal monthly meetings, regular communication is maintained with assessors through weekly movement schedules, progression logs and forecasts. There are also effective informal communications. During its first year the company arranged three social events which all staff attended. These events provide the staff with the opportunity to liaise and improve the effective teamwork that has been developed.

23. New staff are recruited by advertisements placed in local papers. Staff receive an induction and shadow different members of staff for a period so that they understand all aspects of the business. The operations manager appraises each member of staff every six months and discusses their individual training needs as well as future business needs. All the partners joining the company have experience and qualifications and they continue to work towards new qualifications. The assessors are working towards a variety of qualifications including for the accreditation of prior learning or advice and guidance, key skills and in occupational health and safety. The company is recruiting a marketing person to help develop the business. The procedures for staff recruitment, induction, appraisal and development are not documented. The current job descriptions are narrow in scope and do not reflect the current roles undertaken by each person. The role and responsibilities of the operations manager are not clearly defined. The operations manager has recently taken sick leave and some of the managerial tasks have not been adequately covered. Responsibility for trainee support and quality assurance is not defined.

24. There is no process to co-ordinate or manage training. The employers carry out most training on-the-job and there are no structured off-the-job training sessions. The assessors are not always aware of what training is planned or what has taken place. Some trainees will inform assessors when they have had on-the-job training or attended off-the-job courses but this is not recorded. Only when a gap in the trainees' knowledge is identified during assessments will the assessors discuss training with the supervisor or manager or arrange a coaching session.

25. The assessors use a matrix to record the evidence collected for each element of the NVQ and to show the progress of trainees. The assessors update the matrix after each visit and submit a copy to the office every month. Not all trainees have their progress recorded in this manner as each assessor completes the matrix in a different way. The information does not allow managers to easily identify trainees who are progressing slowly and so address issues early. Each month the assessors forecast what trainees will achieve during the next four months. These forecasts are used by the internal verifier to ensure that trainees are registered and internal

verification is planned. The forecasts are not always accurate and trainees often achieve in a different period to the one originally planned: some late, a few early. There is no systematic evaluation of the accuracy of the forecasts to improve management decisions and the performance of assessors.

Quality assurance

Grade 3

26. Focus Training has systems and procedures which comply with the TEC contract and have resulted in preferred supplier status. Several systems and procedures are still in development as the company has been in existence for only just over one year. Quality assurance arrangements are generally focussed on contract compliance and audit. The opinions of trainees, employers and training staff are collected, but they are not analysed or shared. Much data and information are collected but not analysed and used to influence business planning or quality assurance. The self-assessment process was carried out in consultation with all members of staff. The final self-assessment report gave a fair representation of provision, although many of the strengths were repeated in several sections and some were considered to be no more than normal practice. Inspectors identified additional weaknesses and awarded a lower grade than that proposed in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ rigorous internal verification system
- ◆ some improvement from informal arrangements

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient written quality assurance procedures
- ◆ performance targets not set
- ◆ ineffective data analysis

27. The internal verification systems are rigorous and thorough. Assessors are regularly observed assessing trainees. A report is prepared recording any training needs or issues which need to be resolved. General issues are discussed with all assessors at the monthly quality meetings. New assessors are given additional support and their work is sampled more thoroughly. There is systematic sampling of all portfolios across the range of units both during the programme and on completion of the NVQ. Every time a portfolio is sampled, written feedback is given to the assessor and the trainee. The general standard of portfolios is high. They are well organised and contain a diverse range of evidence, including work products, direct observation of tasks occurring naturally at work and case studies compiled by the trainees. The external verifier visits Focus Training monthly allowing a prompt issue of certificates and portfolios after verification. The external verifier has recently attended a quality meeting to meet staff and answer questions.

28. The current informal quality assurance arrangements have resulted in improvements which are of direct benefit to trainees. Although written procedures have yet to be developed there are many examples of improvements being made as a result of issues raised at the regular staff meetings or through communication with trainees and employers. A new system has been introduced to ensure that each trainee receives a file with all the relevant standards, optional units and key skills for their particular programme. Trainees are issued with these individualised packs within a few weeks of starting. Checklists have been developed to help ensure that trainees receive all relevant information at the start of their programmes. The checklists are also used to assist in auditing the trainees' files. Both trainees and assessors now receive copies of assessment and action planning forms. A review showed that some of the feedback given to trainees lacked detail. Following discussions at a monthly meeting all assessors now give more detailed written feedback to trainees. The action plans, which have been developed following the self-assessment process, are already taking effect. A resource library is now established, initial assessment tests are being developed and several staff have achieved additional qualifications.

29. There is no comprehensive quality assurance system, which embraces all areas of the provider's work. There are few documented systems and procedures. Many of the procedures have not been reviewed or updated to reflect the work being undertaken. There are no procedures for recruitment and selection of staff or trainees or to ensure that assessors provide trainees with the same quality of input at reviews or during coaching sessions. The current arrangements focus on contract compliance and not the trainees' learning experience. The development of quality assurance arrangements has not been the main priority during the first year of operation. The company has relied on its staff's experience and expertise. Focus Training recognises the need to review all its policies and procedures as part of its growth and development.

30. Performance targets set within the company are focussed on meeting the TEC contract. There are few company targets based on organisational requirements or as a measure for improvement. There are no targets set for measuring improved performance by staff or trainees. There are no targets for starts, retention or achievement in the programmes offered.

31. Focus Training collects information and data to meet contractual requirements. In addition, questionnaires are sent to trainees, employers and training staff at various points during the programmes. This information is being collated, but has not been analysed. The questionnaires currently used do not provide Focus Training with the information it requires to improve training. The destination and achievements of leavers are not systematically monitored. The data which are collected have not been evaluated to establish trends and inform management decisions for continuous improvement.