



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT AUGUST 2000

# Aston Commercial Training

## SUMMARY

Aston Commercial Training is an excellent training company. The training provided in business administration is outstanding. Almost three-quarters of all trainees leaving training programmes do so having achieved all that they set out to do. The training is well planned and effectively managed to meet the needs of the trainees and local employers. The company's employees are well trained and work exceptionally well together as a team. Their views are constantly sought on how the company can continually improve its service to trainees and employers. The management team and staff of the company treat everyone fairly. Aston Commercial Training continually analyses and evaluates all aspects of its operation. Custom and practice is constantly challenged and replaced with new, often innovative, ways of working in an effort to improve the experience and outcomes for trainees. Aston Commercial Training is a well-known and respected local training company. It has developed excellent working relationships with many local and national organisations involved in training and regularly uses this network to support its trainees more effectively.

### GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Business administration	1

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

### KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ good training resources
- ◆ all trainees work towards additional qualifications
- ◆ comprehensive and demanding targets set for trainees
- ◆ good achievement rates
- ◆ comprehensive analysis of equal opportunities data
- ◆ good assessment and development of key skills for all trainees
- ◆ exceptional advice on employment and progression
- ◆ open and consultative management style
- ◆ good integration of internal verification with the quality assurance arrangements

### KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no key weaknesses identified

## INTRODUCTION

1. Aston Commercial Training (Aston) was established in 1987 as a private training company. It operates from one site in the centre of Northampton. It has held a contract directly with Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce Training and Enterprise (CCTE) since April 1997. Prior to 1997, Aston worked as a subcontractor for another private training company in addition to its commercial training work with local employers. In 1999, the company expanded its service to include a commercial recruitment department. The recruitment department works to find employment predominately for people aged 16 to 25, most of whom are trainees. The company operates with nine full-time and four part-time employees.

2. Aston offers training towards national vocational qualifications (NVQs), and other nationally recognised qualifications, in business administration. Trainees are either national trainees or modern apprentices. There are currently 78 trainees funded through contracts with Northampton CCTE. All trainees are employed in local companies or receive a training allowance from Aston as they wait to find a job.

3. Since 1968, Northampton has grown from a county market town to the thriving regional business centre it is today, with 57 per cent of Britain's population and 50 per cent of manufacturing and production activity located within a 100 miles radius. More and more companies are choosing to make Northampton their base because of its central location. Nearly 251,000 people are employed in the county, concentrated in three main sectors: manufacturing, wholesale and retail and business services. Manufacturing and non-manufacturing output growth is likely to be faster than the UK average, with the non-manufacturing side expected to outperform the manufacturing side. According to a study carried out by Northamptonshire Borough Council, the majority of employers in the Northamptonshire area believe that the average employee needs a higher level of basic skills. The main concerns are concentrated in personal skills, basic abilities, familiarity with information technology and communication skills. Three-fifths of all Northamptonshire employers provided or arranged off-the-job training for their employees in 1999. The majority of these firms did so towards formal qualifications, mostly using private training providers.

4. The unemployment figures for July 2000 show the overall rate for Northamptonshire as 2.3 per cent compared with 3.5 per cent for England. This figure is as low as 1.2 per cent for South Northamptonshire but rises to 2.8 per cent for the east of the county. In Northamptonshire, 3.5 per cent of the population are from minority ethnic backgrounds. In 1999, the proportion of pupils leaving school with five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grades A to C was 46.7 per cent in Northamptonshire compared with 47.9 per cent nationally.

## INSPECTION FINDINGS

5. Aston produced its third self-assessment report three months before the inspection. The report was written predominately by the two partners of the company with input from all staff.

6. A team of four inspectors spent a total of 12 days at Aston during August 2000. Inspectors examined the company, CCTE and awarding body's documents. They held 13 interviews with staff, met with and interviewed 30 trainees and held discussions with eight local employers. They examined assessment records, trainees' work and the portfolios they are completing for their NVQs. Inspectors also observed training and instruction sessions, three of which were awarded a grade 1 and one a grade 2.

### OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

#### **Business administration**

#### **Grade 1**

7. Aston specialises in providing administration and clerical training to young people. It offers training in administration and accounting towards NVQs at levels 2 and 3. There are currently 56 national trainees and 22 modern apprentices. Trainees are recruited from employers or by them applying directly to the training programmes as a result of advertising. Those trainees recruited directly can spend up to three months with Aston on an intensive training programme prior to full-time employment. This is individually tailored to their training needs and gives them the opportunity to find out if administration is an appropriate career route for them. They are able to go on work placements during this initial training period. The programme comprises learning a range of administrative and computer skills, including touch-typing within the first two weeks. Trainees take additional qualifications, as required, to suit their own and their employers' needs. All trainees receive an individual induction and an initial assessment. During the period of intensive training, trainees are reviewed each week. They are monitored daily for punctuality, attendance, work rate and meeting targets. Trainees who are not as confident as others are able to undertake a trial day with employers, or a work placement for a maximum of four weeks in order to help them to gain confidence. During this time, they begin collecting evidence for their NVQs. Once trainees are in employment, they spend one half day a week learning theory for their NVQs, developing their key skills. Attendance and punctuality are again carefully monitored and any absences are followed up immediately. All absences and instances of being late are recorded on attendance sheets and included in a report, which is discussed with the employer at the workplace monitoring visit. Those on work placements, or employed, have reviews with staff every eight to 10 weeks in the workplace. In its self-assessment report the company did not identify weaknesses relating to on-the-job training and underestimated its strengths. The

grade awarded by inspectors is higher than that given by Aston in the report.

### STRENGTHS

#### GOOD PRACTICE

*To reinforce the understanding of the NVQ process and the relevance and purpose for developing key skills, reminders are displayed as colourful graphic posters throughout the training centre. Other key elements of the training process are further explained in the same format, such as the purpose of an individual training plan and the objectives of a review meeting.*

- ◆ extensive links with employers
- ◆ comprehensive guides for trainees and employers
- ◆ good training resources
- ◆ all trainees work towards additional qualifications
- ◆ comprehensive and challenging targets set for trainees
- ◆ rigorous assessment practices
- ◆ good achievement rates

### WEAKNESSES

- ◆ missed opportunities to link some training courses to NVQ work

8. Aston has links with a wide range of employers in the Northampton area, which are maintained through its commercial recruitment agency. Employers include solicitors, financial consultants, accountants, payroll specialists and telecommunications organisations. The recruitment agency focuses on jobs for 16 to 24 year olds. Aston recruits and trains young people who are eligible for government-funded training. This service is promoted widely by Aston, more recently through the Internet on the company's website.

9. Trainees and employers are issued with a range of guides which give clear and detailed information for all stages of the training programme. This includes information relating to interviews, work experience, qualification outlines, and day-release training. The interview guide contains step-by-step information relating to dress standards, advice on what to take to interviews, and descriptions of each stage of the interview process including what to do after the interview. Other guides for trainees contain information on each training qualification such as the national traineeships in administration and accounting and modern apprenticeships in administration. They contain detailed advice and guidance on the structure of the programme, additional qualifications, portfolios and portfolio building, attendance, training co-ordination and individual trainees' responsibilities. The guides are informative, easy to understand and have relevant graphics to illustrate information and instructions. The guides issued to employers relate to the range of qualifications which the company offers, as well as details relating to the structure of the day-release programme for trainees. They include information on attendance patterns, types of programmes, health and safety, background to NVQs, and evidence collection and recording. Programme structures relating to national traineeships and modern apprenticeships are also included. Employers have a clear understanding of all aspects of the training programmes. Guides are also customised for large local employers where the company has a number of trainees in employment.

10. Trainees have access to a good range of training resources within the company. Resources include spacious computer-training suites fully equipped to

#### GOOD PRACTICE

*Trainers check and review challenging targets with trainees on a weekly basis. The reviews are recorded in detail and a copy is always given to trainees for future reference. The number of modules achieved for additional qualifications, as well as assignments for the NVQ, are clearly recorded, meaning that trainees are aware, at all times, of their progress towards achievement.*

industrial standards with the latest software. All rooms have information on the walls clearly explaining aspects of the training process. There are clear explanations of targets, assessments, evidence, feedback, NVQs and reviews. These serve as constant reminders to trainees and reinforce the learning process. Trainees are issued with open-learning workpacks for administration, accounting and key skills at levels 1 to 3 to supplement their training programmes. They work on a number of assignments which are marked immediately on completion. If trainees are working on past examination papers, these too are marked and returned within a day. The administration packs clearly relate to elements and units of the NVQ and give in-depth information which trainees can easily understand and assimilate. Trainees on the accounting and administration programmes are given specific guidelines on evidence collection in the workplace to meet the requirements of the NVQ. Trainees are also issued with learning materials to address any weaknesses in communication, application of number and information technology which were identified through the initial assessment process. Trainees enjoy using the packs and they find the instructions and guidance notes straightforward and easy to understand. These workpacks link directly to workplace activities and have been designed to involve employers, who are able to give testimonials relating to the quality of trainees' work. Trainees work at their own pace towards individual targets. Staff are well qualified with a wide range of appropriate qualifications and occupational experience. Two trainers support a group of trainees at any one time, giving coaching, advice and feedback as required in training rooms with a maximum of one trainer to 12 trainees. Trainees appreciate this attention to detail and access to individual support. Where trainees are unable to attend off-the-job training because they live too far from the training centre to travel or because of job demands, Aston's training staff make arrangements to visit the trainees at work to provide training and support.

11. Trainees have access to a range of additional qualifications to supplement their learning programmes. Staff regularly discuss with employers any training programmes which would benefit the trainee and the employer's own operation. These include nationally recognised qualifications in book-keeping, text-processing and audio-typing. Trainees are also able to gain higher level qualifications in key skills, information technology, spreadsheets and presentation packages, as required to meet the needs of employers and enhance their own career prospects. In one example, Aston purchased an external training programme for one trainee in order to meet the specific needs of her workplace. Many employers are also keen for trainees to learn how to use spreadsheets in order to be involved in setting up computerised payroll systems at work. Trainees are often able to complete more complex tasks and practice skills in the workplace which they have learnt through taking extra qualifications. Several employers link achievement of qualifications with appraisals, internal development programmes and subsequent salary increases and promotions.

12. Trainees are set a range of targets by training staff throughout their training programme. They are fully aware of the work they have completed and what remains outstanding. Trainees on the intensive course aim to complete four pieces of work relating to their NVQ and to achieve an agreed standard of keyboarding

skills by the end of the first week. The keyboarding programme is highly structured. In the second week, trainees are expected to produce six pieces of evidence for the NVQ and key skills, and to complete the keyboarding course. At the end of the third week, trainees are frequently working on past papers for text processing and are able to take part in the extended induction sessions relating to equal opportunities and harassment. Throughout this time, they gain practical experience working in Aston's busy reception and answering the telephone to external callers. Trainees' work is promptly marked and followed up by detailed feedback and guidance. Staff hold regular standardisation and moderation meetings to check on targets set for trainees and to moderate reports and check on grading for all practice examination papers. Employed trainees are also set challenging monthly targets. They include producing six pieces of evidence each month towards the administration NVQ at level 2 or 3. These can be made up from witness statements from employers, work-based evidence for the NVQ and evidence for the key skills units. All targets are recorded and discussed every morning at meetings with staff to monitor individual progress. Weekly memoranda are also circulated to staff giving information on which trainees are ready for assessment. Many trainees actively try to exceed the targets in the workplace with the ongoing support from their employers. Employed trainees produce a comprehensive report on their individual company. This is completed in conjunction with the employer and is used effectively as key skills evidence.

13. Assessments are rigorous and comprehensive. Assessors take time to discuss all aspects of the assessment process with trainees. This includes giving trainees written copies of the appeals procedure, accompanied by a verbal explanation of its contents. Trainees are told in simple language how they will be assessed. They answer verbal questions and complete written questions, which test a wide range of knowledge and understanding. All answers are recorded and checked with trainees. Assessors use digital cameras to record aspects of the assessment activity. Photographs are then used to enhance the quality of the evidence in portfolios. Assessors take time to review portfolio evidence to ensure that all requirements of the NVQ are met. All trainees receive verbal and written feedback following an assessment. They are very clear about their achievements and what they need to do next. Completed assessments are then recorded on individual training plans and the information is circulated to other staff.

14. Achievement rates are high. The average length of time to complete a national traineeship programme is seven months with an additional nine months to complete the modern apprenticeship. For the year from April 1999-2000, 77.4 per cent of all trainees leaving Aston's modern apprenticeship programme achieved the full award and 71 per cent of those leaving the national traineeship programme achieved their full award.

15. Employers provide on-the-job training in the workplace. This can be through coaching, direct tuition or mentoring. Some trainees have undergone external computer training with their employers and others have had a range of on-the-job learning and external training on quality systems, health and safety, telephone customer service training and stock control. Assessors, however, are not always



aware that this has taken place, and opportunities to include this training within the training or assessment plans are missed.

## GENERIC AREAS

### Equal opportunities

### Grade 1

#### **GOOD PRACTICE**

*Trainees are given an equal opportunities questionnaire to complete four weeks after starting their training programmes. It is designed to check trainees' understanding of the company's equal opportunities policy and its related documents. The questionnaire asks trainees, for example, to name seven specific groups of people who are listed in the policy, and how they should go about making a complaint either at work or the training centre.*

16. Aston has a comprehensive equal opportunities policy which includes information on recruitment, selection, induction, staff training, grievance procedures, disability and harassment. It is reviewed annually. Written procedures also detail how the policy will be monitored and evaluated. The company partners are responsible for the implementation of the policy. All staff, trainees and employers receive a copy of the policy, including detailed information relating to the grievance, harassment and complaints procedures. Trainees receive written information relating to appeals procedures on assessments for NVQs. Statistics for those trainees from minority ethnic groups and for trainees with disabilities are collected and analysed at each stage of the training process. Records of progress made in equal opportunities are kept and all complaints are logged. Research is carried out into ways of helping and advising trainees and in advertising training to the local community. Advertising materials and information given to trainees and employers contain a written commitment of Aston's aim to work towards equality of opportunity for all. The self-assessment report was accurate in identifying most strengths, and the weaknesses identified had been sufficiently addressed. Inspectors identified additional strengths and a higher grade was awarded than that given by the company.

#### **GOOD PRACTICE**

*One employer indicated that it would only like to be sent women for job interviews. The perception held by the employer was that men were more interested in engineering careers. A senior manager of Aston visited the employer to reinforce the equal opportunities policy. Aston sent an equal number of men and women for interview. A man was successful at interview and subsequently employed and trained.*

#### STRENGTHS

- ◆ in-depth awareness by trainees of equal opportunities issues
- ◆ comprehensive analysis of equal opportunities data
- ◆ clear targeting of promotional materials towards under-represented groups
- ◆ effective complaints procedure use to aid continuous improvement
- ◆ well-trained staff support trainees with diverse needs

#### WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no access to training centre for those using wheelchairs

17. Trainees' awareness of equal opportunities is very good. Discussions of equal opportunities policies and issues are included in the initial induction and review process. Trainees are issued with comprehensive information relating to harassment. All equal opportunities issues are subsequently reinforced through the extended induction programme. A recent training session on harassment was well received and provoked a lot of discussion among trainees. The induction also



includes issuing questionnaires to trainees in order to reinforce learning and follow up any areas of uncertainty, which may include further training. One questionnaire focuses particularly on trainees' comprehension of the equal opportunities policy. A further questionnaire includes gathering information on trainees' understanding of equal opportunities once in employment and how they are being treated in terms of employment and training. Negative responses are dealt with immediately and results recorded on the questionnaire. For example, a recent analysis of responses showed how some trainees did not recognise that discrimination against people with disabilities also includes discrimination against fellow trainees. This was rapidly addressed in an awareness-raising session for all trainees. It also highlighted that one trainee felt she was only sometimes treated fairly at work. One of the company's partners telephoned the trainee and found out that the issue was related to the trainee's dissatisfaction with company salaries. This issue was resolved successfully with the employer.

18. All employers are issued with information on equal opportunities which relate to trainees and sign an agreement on fair work practices, including procedures for recruitment, selection, development and training of employees. The agreement also brings the attention of employers to the need to be aware of discriminatory behaviour, including racist and sexist language in the workplace. All employers are required to adopt Aston's equal opportunities policy if they do not have one of their own.

19. When trainees join the programme, their source of referral is analysed in order to evaluate the success of Aston's marketing activities. These include referrals from newspaper advertisements, schools, careers offices and personal recommendations. The company tracks referrals from over 57 schools in the county. It then monitors trainees at entry to ensure that they reflect the diversity of the local minority ethnic population. Once on a training programme, trainees are monitored by gender, disability, age and ethnic group for individual achievement, as well as for the percentage of men, women and people from minority ethnic groups who are in employment. This information is then recorded on a database and used when planning promotional activities in order to target under-represented groups. The analysis has enabled Aston to identify the gender imbalance in the administration programme and the number of trainees in any minority ethnic group currently in employment. Thirty-four per cent of trainees in administration are men. Data are collected monthly and discussed at team meetings and targets for the entire recruitment team are set. One target has been to increase the number of men training in administration. If these targets are not met within a month, individual staff targets for recruitment are set. Every three months, data are benchmarked against county statistics.

20. The company has undertaken a range of measures to try to redress the gender imbalance and is playing an active role in targeting under-represented groups. A range of literature and information, particularly about careers in administration has been sent out to male-dominated community groups such as the Scouts, the Boys Brigade, Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, Air Training Corps, YMCA and local theatre and dance groups. Staff have also attended careers fairs targeted towards

specific minority ethnic groups and have arranged for literature to be translated into Bengali. They have written to the advice and information service for the Bangladeshi community and contacted local libraries to display information. Aston is currently distributing leaflets to Asian businesses and shopkeepers in many local areas. As a result, it is in discussion with some possible new employers. Staff speak personally to parents of potential female trainees from minority ethnic groups to reassure and help them to gain a total understanding of all aspects of the training programme and the benefits to the trainees. Aston also has a prayer room available for trainees.

21. The company has developed its own website which is used to good effect to attract a range of trainees from diverse backgrounds. It has also taken advantage of the large windows of its premises that overlook the street below to display informative materials which promote equal opportunities. An advertising board has been placed outside the entrance to the training centre to emphasise that training opportunities are available for all. Marketing material is used to good effect. Aston makes a conscious effort to improve every aspect of imagery and content of all promotional information, including the workpacks and trainees and employers' guides.

22. Over 13 per cent of trainees are from minority ethnic groups and 29 per cent have disabilities. Recruitment from minority ethnic groups exceeds the local profile by 7.8 per cent and the percentage of people recruited who have disabilities also exceeds the local profile by 15.8 per cent. Over 25 per cent of all modern apprentices are from minority ethnic groups. Analysis also includes statistical information on the number and type of workpacks issued to trainees for key skills in communication and application of number. Data are broken down by ethnic groups in order to highlight whether one particular group regularly needs extra help and support in a particular area. The results for application of number, communication and information technology at level 1 revealed that there were no significant differences in the types of workbooks issued.

23. Procedures to protect trainees from harassment are clearly recorded and are effective. All staff and trainees can report formal and informal complaints, allegations of unfair treatment or dissatisfaction with the training programme. The company keeps issues logs which are used to record all complaints raised by trainees, employers or other outside parties such as the careers offices. The logs are used to record the date the complaint was raised, the date of action taken and the date of the conclusion of the issue. All issues are dealt with promptly and to the benefit of the trainee. Trainees therefore feel free to raise concerns for any aspects of their training programmes. Staff also use the log to highlight problems relating to trainees who are not succeeding at interviews with employers. Meetings are then set up with trainees to support them through specialist one-to-one training and to improve their confidence. Aston is also prepared to challenge the stereotypical views expressed by a minority of employers, even when they have long-standing and strong working relationships with them, if they suspect any forms of discrimination against trainees. This includes situations where employers are suspected of sexual discrimination when interviewing potential trainees, as

well as concerns raised by assessors relating to health and safety for trainees in the workplace. Detailed records are kept of any correspondence with employers resulting from issues raised and how matters are resolved. Issues raised are also discussed at staff meetings, together with other concerns relating to equal opportunities.

24. Equal opportunities issues are understood and fully supported by all staff. There is a commitment to staff training in equal opportunities. This has included updates on principal legislation and harassment at work. Other staff have attended training courses on dyslexia, disability discrimination, drug awareness and dyspraxia awareness. All information from these courses is circulated to other staff in order to help them deal with trainees who have a range of personal and social difficulties. Feedback on courses attended is given at staff meetings and examples of good practice are shared. Staff development has also been used to good effect in order to promote equal opportunities practices and recommend improvements. The company has developed equal opportunities policies, with accompanying guidance notes, which include extensive information relating to harassment to ensure that the awareness of all staff and trainees is raised. All staff involved in interviewing trainees have attended training on recruitment and selection.

25. There are no facilities at the training centre for those using wheelchairs. The offices and training rooms at Aston can only be accessed by two flights of narrow stairs. The company has, however, made arrangements with the local careers service and a nearby hotel, to use the hotel for interviews with potential trainees who may find access to the offices difficult. Aston has a number of trainees with disabilities who are supported on a one-to-one basis. The company has purchased specialist equipment, including a telephone handset for trainees with a hearing impairment. One member of staff is able to train in Braille. Trainers also visit companies to give-off-the-job training on the employer's premises if trainees have any difficulties in going to the training centre for this. There is a laptop computer that can be loaned to trainees if required.

## **Trainee support**

## **Grade 1**

26. Potential trainees are recruited through the local careers service, advertising in local newspapers, or by direct application following personal recommendation from friends or teachers. Some trainees are referred directly by their employers. All entrants are interviewed by recruitment consultants to identify their previous qualifications and experience. Once accepted, they have an initial assessment of their key skills, and use an assessment tool specially designed to determine trainees' individual needs for additional learning support. Those who are not accepted are referred to other local training providers who can offer training more appropriate to their needs. The company carries out accreditation of trainees' prior learning and achievement to develop individual plans for assessment and training. Trainees then begin a period of intensive learning to prepare them for employment, which begins with the induction programme. Recruitment consultants examine and

**GOOD PRACTICE**

*All trainees' successes are celebrated. A section of the company's website is dedicated to the 'trainee of the month'. Trainees regularly receive letters of congratulation and in-house certificates of achievement. When a trainee is successful in finding a job, they are presented with a specifically designed drinks mug filled with sweets.*

discuss job opportunities with trainees, and spend time matching trainees with jobs which suit their individual abilities and experience. Recruitment staff offer trainees a job opportunity as soon as one can be found, and then help them to prepare for job interviews by intensive coaching. After the interview, trainees are asked to complete a short questionnaire and send it to Aston in a pre-paid envelope. The questionnaire gathers feedback on whether all details relating to the job were correct and whether Aston's staff were friendly, helpful and understanding regarding the trainees' job requirements. Some large and small local employers regularly offer a number of jobs linked to a national traineeship or modern apprenticeship programme. Aston insists that all trainees are paid a minimum weekly wage to ensure that employers are committed to their training. Trainees use a range of workbooks and manuals to support their studies, their job applications and their NVQs. Trainees receive regular reviews of their progress on target skills required and NVQ achievements by Aston's staff, who also offer pastoral support to those who need it. Trainees keep a copy of the record of review. The self-assessment report was generally accurate in identifying the strengths relating to trainee support. Inspectors awarded a higher grade than that given by the company.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

*All trainees benefit from an extremely effective and well-planned key skills' diagnostic toolkit. The assessment identifies areas of competence and areas for development. Staff then direct trainees to a series of workpacks designed to develop competence in key skills with an administrative environment. If trainees are marked as competent to the key skills level required by the qualification framework, they will work on developing that area further to the next key skills level.*

**STRENGTHS**

- ◆ exceptional recruitment practices
- ◆ comprehensive ongoing induction for most trainees
- ◆ effective use of initial assessment when developing training plans
- ◆ innovative key skills assessment
- ◆ comprehensive monitoring of trainees' progress
- ◆ exceptional advice on employment and progression

**WEAKNESSES**

- ◆ no significant weaknesses identified

27. Trainees arrive at Aston by responding to advertising in local newspapers, or by personal recommendation by friends and relatives, or referrals from the careers service and other training providers. Training opportunities are offered in newspaper advertisements, side-by-side with job vacancies. Potential trainees can attend frequent open days to see what training is offered. Staff trained in Aston's selection processes interview all prospective trainees and give accurate information and impartial advice about training and employment opportunities. Aston recommends that applicants have, or are expected to achieve, at least four GCSEs at grade C or better to join the programmes, although this is only a guide. Those who do not meet this requirement or are not seeking to work or train in administration are offered referrals to other local training providers. Recruitment staff have detailed lists of other local recruitment agencies and training providers and offer advice to meet trainees' individual needs, giving contact details and explaining how to apply. All aspects of the recruitment process are thoroughly

recorded in a well-written procedures manual, which includes examples of correspondence to trainees, which are supportive in nature and written in plain language.

28. Trainees begin an initial assessment of their occupational skills and key skills by discussion with the training manager at the first meeting and before beginning a more formal diagnosis. All trainees work through a highly effective assessment of key skills using a diagnostic tool to determine their strengths and weaknesses in communication, application of number and information technology. Trainees' personal skills are assessed and recorded during intensive training or in the workplace. The assessment provides trainees with a detailed and comprehensive review of the areas in which they need to develop their key skills further. Trainers help to interpret the results of the assessments and trainees are directed by the scores they gained in each part to individual workbooks containing appropriate learning materials. During the period of intensive training or day release trainees work progressively and effectively through the workbooks, with support from training staff. Results of initial assessments in occupational and key skills are used to develop individual training plans. Initial assessments of trainees' skills are updated at reviews or monitoring visits. Some employers who have recruited using their own selection criteria refer trainees directly to Aston for day-release off-the-job training. Aston's staff assess these trainees' key skills and occupational skills in the same way as those who are directly recruited. Every trainee's prior learning and experience is assessed, analysed and used to complement other evidence to demonstrate competence. There are staff who are skilled, and appropriately qualified, to judge and incorporate evidence of prior learning and achievement. Each trainees' initial assessment record contains details of where evidence of their prior achievement can be found. For trainees who have achieved general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) at school or college, the key skills diagnostic tool provides an effective assessment of their prior achievement.

29. All trainees begin an induction programme on their first day at Aston. They learn in small groups or individually depending upon numbers joining on that day. Induction begins with an effective training session which covers trainees' immediate needs and the formal requirements of health and safety and equality of opportunity. The use and discussion of well-written case studies helps trainees learn effectively, and most trainees have a clear recollection of this part of their induction. The induction process continues throughout the trainees' time at Aston, whenever there are changes in programmes or when reinforcement is needed, and trainees understand why their induction process is ongoing. Following work towards the self-assessment report, trainers recognised that trainees recruited by employers and referred for day release had lower levels of recollection and understanding of induction than those recruited to it directly. Seven per cent of the total number of trainees were recruited in this way and were not receiving as thorough an induction to Aston's training programmes. Changes were made in the current operating year and all trainees now experience the same high quality of induction.

30. Trainees have formal reviews of their progress both in the workplace and at

Aston's training centre. They meet the training manager at least once every 13 weeks, in addition to visits in the workplace by trainers from Aston carrying out reviews of progress at least every eight weeks. All reviews include the workplace supervisor. Aston's staff hold meetings each morning to monitor progress of all trainees who are expected into the training centre, to determine their next steps and agree what their individual needs for support might be. Details of these meetings are recorded and followed up to ensure that trainees who require learning or pastoral support are helped promptly and effectively. Trainees who need additional learning support receive it from their trainer or from the training manager. Staff have been trained to give additional learning support or advice. The training manager has received counselling training, which covered drug awareness. Other staff have received training in dealing with harassment at work, and the requirements of employment legislation. Trainees who experience difficulties in their workplaces can contact their trainers at any time for advice or support, and Aston's senior partners give all trainees their home telephone numbers for problems or emergencies out of office hours. Trainees who need additional help with their training can visit the training centre during the special out-of-hours opening on one evening and one Saturday each month. They can use all the facilities, do further work on their qualifications or key skills, or seek advice from trainers about any difficulties they may have. The training manager has management responsibility for trainee support, reporting to the managing partner, which makes the support of trainees a very high priority throughout the company.

31. Many trainees start at Aston on the full-time intensive learning programme until they find a job. Each trainee is supported in job-search activities by an individual recruitment consultant, who offers trainees the opportunity to include their details on the list of people seeking jobs on Aston's Internet site. Recruitment consultants meet the trainees they are responsible for at least once each week to discuss job-search progress, and meet more frequently when trainees have additional learning support needs or a job interview to attend. Recruitment staff visit employers seeking trainees to gather job description details and to gain an impression of the workplace. When trainees who might be suitable for the job have been identified, they are given thorough, timely and detailed preparation for the job interview. The preparation typically includes discussion of the company, the job role, the employer's requirements, an impression of the workplace and how to get there. The trainee and consultant work on a list of questions which might be asked during the interview, as well as those which the trainee might ask, and conclude with a discussion on dress and appearance for the interview. Aston has a small stock of clothing and shoes for use by trainees who do not have suitable clothing for interviews. All trainees are given a bound, written guide to job interviews, which is easy to follow and acts as a reminder of the key points. Immediately after the interview trainees return to discuss what happened and, if unsuccessful, are given feedback from the consultant. They are supported in their disappointment and given guidance on how to overcome similar problems next time. Jobs are usually found quickly, typically within four weeks. All trainees place high value on the extent and nature of the job-preparation interviews. Recruitment staff meet each week to discuss trainees' job-finding progress and separately with training staff to share information on any additional learning



support which may be needed.

32. Celebrating trainees' successes is an important part of the learning process and of Aston's support. Each month, the trainee who has made the most outstanding achievement is named as 'trainee of the month' and appears in a personal page on Aston's website. Often, trainees recognised in this way have done so despite personal and learning difficulties but have demonstrated tenacity and commitment, good timekeeping and willingness to make extra efforts to achieve their personal goals, targets and learning objectives. All trainees at Aston are aware of the webpage and celebrate their colleagues' recognition. Each trainee receives other forms of personal recognition when they find a job and receive a congratulatory letter and a gift.

33. Trainers, recruitment consultants and managers have weekly meetings to consider trainees' additional training and support needs. All of these meetings are minuted and recorded, and follow-up activities are planned to ensure that trainees' needs are not overlooked. All the notes are reviewed at the following meetings so that all staff are aware of the current position with each trainee.

## Management of training

## Grade 1

34. Aston is a family-run business. The company operates as a recruitment agency as well as a training provider for both private and government-funded training programmes. The two partners hold overall responsibility for the strategic management of the company. One partner is primarily responsible for running the training while the other manages the accounts and contractual compliance issues. In addition, there are three operational managers with responsibility for recruitment, training and development. There is one full-time and one part-time member of staff responsible for training and assessment duties, and two full-time recruitment consultants. A full-time member of staff acts as a customer service advisor and the link between Aston, the trainee and the employer. There are a further two part-time administrators. Training is given within the training centre. Assessments are carried out within the workplace. Aston exceeded its CCTE contractual targets for the year from April 1999 to April 2000 and has received a contract potentially worth 60 per cent more for the next contractual year. Aston achieved the Investors in People Standard in 1997 and is to be reassessed in September 2000. Staff appraisals take place every four months. Aston has consistently achieved a wide range of quality audit and financial contract requirements set by the CCTE in order to be recognised as one of the three preferred training providers in the county. This has been the case since 1998. The self-assessment report was accurate and identified all of the strengths found by inspectors. The one weakness identified has been addressed. Inspectors awarded a higher grade than that given by Aston in the self-assessment report.

### **GOOD PRACTICE**

*Aston holds reviews with its staff every four months. As well as considering past performance and future training needs, the day-to-day duties of staff are compared against their current job descriptions. Any differences between stated and actual duties are discussed and the job description is amended accordingly. This helps to ensure that staff are effectively deployed and fully understand their role within the company.*



### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ good communication between managers and staff
- ◆ all staff fully involved with business planning
- ◆ clearly defined roles for staff
- ◆ thorough staff appraisal and development arrangements
- ◆ good planning of off-the-job training to meet individual needs of trainees and employers
- ◆ effective links with external agencies

### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ no significant weaknesses identified

35. There are frequent and informative formal meetings between all members of staff, in addition to the informal communication which takes place every day. The senior partner meets with each operational manager on a weekly basis to discuss issues, focusing on trainees' progress and any problems relating to the training department. These meetings are also used to discuss staff and policy issues and to set effective action plans for individual managers and their areas of responsibility. The training department, together with the customer service advisor, meets on a daily basis to discuss trainees' progress. Operational managers from the recruitment and training department formally meet every week to discuss current vacancies and trainees' progress. Trainees' details are added to a database containing relevant information for employment which is checked and updated regularly. This enables the company to be able to match trainees with potential employment opportunities. Additionally, contract issues are discussed between the partners and operational managers twice a month. Most meetings have set agendas and are minuted, with action points identified. Written notes are made at all meetings when formal minutes are not created.

36. The business plan is comprehensive and is focused on the needs of trainees, employers and the business in general. The plan is clearly understood by all members of staff. The partners create the plan annually in line with the CCTE's contractual year. They fully involve all members of staff by reviewing the previous year's plan, and setting targets for the following year. A draft version of the plan is circulated to all staff who pass comment on it which either seek clarification, support or reject proposals. This is then returned to the partners and managers who amend it accordingly. This process continues until everyone is comfortable with the plan. The content of the plan specifically refers to financial issues, recruitment, marketing, training and development, inspection, quality assurance issues, and maintenance of Aston's preferred supplier status and Investors in People Standard. The attention to detail within the plan extends to the point that total expenditure for the company is shared with all members of staff. The action plan to reduce expenditure includes the introduction of departmental budgets, and the setting of targets specifically orientated to the acquisition of income from the recruitment side of the business, as well as from private and government-funded sources. The

partners spend a day outlining the plan to all members of staff. Each staff member receives a personal, bound copy of the plan.

37. All staff have job descriptions, which are accurate and reflect their duties. Staff deployment is effective and helps trainees' smooth transition from initial interview by the recruitment department through to the involvement of the training department. Once a trainee is ready for the workplace, the training department then informs the recruitment department, which then concentrates its efforts on finding a suitable workplace for the trainee. Aston sends out information on trainees to over 400 companies in the area in order to attract more employers and match trainees to the right jobs. Once in the workplace, the customer service advisor ensures employers, trainees and trainers are informed of the trainees' progress and are able to address issues promptly. Recruitment consultants contact employers once office vacancies have been filled and ask for their views and comments in order to ensure that Aston meets employers' requirements.

38. Staff duties are constantly reviewed during appraisals. Every member of staff benefits from three appraisals each year. These are held between staff and their immediate line managers. Documents used to record the discussions held are simply designed and easy to use. Issues relating to the individual, their team, and the organisation, are identified during the process. Targets are set and staff training, if required, is addressed quickly.

39. The company has excellent working relationships with employers and the customer service advisor has regular contact with trainees and workplace supervisors. This has enabled all parties to identify additional training needs for trainees. One employer wanted to move a trainee into the accountancy department. To prepare the trainee for this, Aston placed the trainee on a book-keeping course. Several employers identified that trainees placed with them had difficulties answering the telephone in a confident manner, so Aston placed the trainees on a telephone skills course. Similarly, if the Aston training staff inform employers that the trainees' normal workplace activities do not cover all of the requirements of the NVQ, employers allow the trainees to change their duties. One typical example is the placing of a trainee onto reception duties to allow contact with the employer's external customers. Prior to trainees changing their duties in the workplace, Aston often gives the trainees experience on its own reception, for example, to help give them confidence. This process is well planned and effectively managed.

40. Senior managers at Aston actively involve themselves in a wide range of groups related to training at both a national and local level. A senior partner is the current chair of the local training providers' network and enjoys excellent working relationships with the CCTE, the local careers service, and most local training providers. The CCTE uses Aston to pilot projects within its training programmes. One example is the key skills diagnostic assessment tool used by Aston. Aston's representatives are involved in many promotional activities to advertise work-based training. One partner regularly attends and gives presentations to organisations involved in education, such as the Further Education Development

Agency (FEDA), Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), Young Enterprise, and the Council for Administration (CFA).

## Quality assurance

## Grade 1

41. Aston's quality assurance arrangements are built around the integrated quality and audit system manual introduced in 1999 by the CCTE. Prior to this time, Aston had three separate quality assurance manuals covering the Investors in People Standard, contractual compliance, and audit and quality assurance procedures. Under the new integrated system, all quality assurance arrangements are in the one manual. One of the company partners manages the quality assurance manual, but representatives from both the recruitment and training departments are responsible for developing new procedures. Both partners of the company are involved in internally auditing procedures and the company employs a training development manager who holds responsibility for reviewing, evaluating and developing training programmes. The self-assessment report accurately identified the company's strengths and the one weakness identified has been addressed through the self-assessment report action plan. The inspectors awarded a higher grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

### GOOD PRACTICE

*Aston conducted a review and evaluation of the numbers of trainees leaving its programmes early. All staff were involved in the evaluation project and discussions were held with staff, trainees and other training providers. The report made several recommendations, some of which required further discussion and clarification with the CCTE. Other recommendations required changes to the recruitment and induction process. All recommendations have been implemented and the level of early leavers has dropped by 10 per cent in four months.*

### STRENGTHS

- ◆ good integration of internal verification with quality assurance arrangements
- ◆ good links between internal auditing and continuous improvement
- ◆ regular collection and evaluation of feedback from trainees and employers
- ◆ clear quality assurance targets set in business plan
- ◆ regular evaluation of training programmes
- ◆ good use of achievement and destinations data to maintain continuous improvement

### WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no significant weaknesses identified

42. Aston's approach to quality assurance has developed significantly over the past three years. There is currently one quality assurance manual, which is based on a model promoted by the CCTE. This manual considers all elements of a training programme and details how they will be quality assured and continuously improved. It incorporates the quality statements of *Raising the Standard* and the company's arrangements for internal verification. Aston employs four internal verifiers who meet on a weekly basis to ensure a consistent approach to verification. The training manager co-ordinates the activities of the verifiers, managing the schedule of verifiers observing assessments, and sharing good

verification practice among colleagues.

43. The internal auditing arrangements of Aston are split into two schedules. One deals primarily with CCTE contractual issues and the other with the quality assurance procedures. Both types of audit are carried out in a similar way, although it is the company's partners who carry out the contractual audits and the training and recruitment managers who carry out the quality assurance audits. All auditing activity is co-ordinated by one of the partners. Each month, one aspect of the CCTE contractual documents is audited as is one of the procedures. The audits are thorough. For example, if individual training plans are the subject of an internal audit one of the partners will carry out a 100 per cent check of current trainees' training plans to ensure full compliance with the CCTE contract. Any non-conformance is recorded and discussed at weekly staff meetings. An action plan to address the issues and to prevent them from recurring is agreed and copied to all staff. A follow-up check of the corrective and preventative action is carried out in all cases.

44. There is reference within the company's quality assurance manual and the business plan to the collection and analysis of trainees and employers' feedback. The company takes customer feedback seriously. It sets targets not only for the levels of satisfaction expressed by trainees and employers, but in terms of the number of responses sent back for analysis. In recent months, the level of postal response to questionnaires from trainees has been maintained at 45 per cent. The company set itself a target to increase the response rate to 60 per cent. In the month prior to inspection, 75 per cent of trainees responded to a satisfaction questionnaire. As part of the evaluation process of employers' questionnaires, all responses are evaluated and the results are made available back to the employers. They are also informed when changes and improvements have been made as a result of their feedback.

45. In addition to the targets set for satisfaction and response rates from trainees and employers, the company's business plan sets a number of other targets relating to quality. These include: achieving high grades from the inspection, maintaining its good status with the CCTE in respect of financial and health and safety audits, and maintaining the Investors in People Standard at a forthcoming re-assessment.

46. Aston employs a development manager whose job is solely to evaluate and develop all aspects of the training programme. This member of staff works closely with the appropriate awarding bodies and the National Training Organisation (NTO) to ensure that Aston's training programmes develop in line with external changes and developments to the qualification standards. The methods for collecting trainees' evidence for the NVQs and the assignments which are set are also continually being evaluated and developed. To support this evaluation and development work, one of the company's partners evaluates other elements of the training programme. Two examples of this include a detailed evaluation of a key skills project which Aston was involved in, which has been shared with other training providers and a detailed study and evaluation of early leavers. Aston looked carefully at the most common time that a trainee would leave a programme

early and the reasons why. The results of the study showed that trainees were more likely to leave in the first two months of starting the programme, but the reasons for leaving varied significantly. In order to improve the statistics for retention, as these data are used as a performance indicator by the CCTE, Aston held detailed conversations with the CCTE about their contract, and made improvements to the induction programme for new trainees. As a result of the project, Aston now delays notifying the CCTE of a new trainee starting a programme for up to two months. This is perfectly within the requirements of the contract and meets with the approval of the CCTE. Trainees still receive an induction within their first week of starting with Aston, now a much more detailed one, and all relevant CCTE paperwork is completed, signed and dated, but not sent immediately to the CCTE. Trainees are paid by Aston from their first day. If a trainee still decides to leave within the first two months, the CCTE is not informed that they have started and they do not therefore appear as an early leaver. Trainees are paid their wages and travel expenses, but the cost is met in full for early leavers by Aston without involving funds from the CCTE. Alternatively, when the trainee is employed or has completed two months' training from the start date, all related paperwork is sent to the CCTE and the trainee is counted from the day that they actually joined the programme. With this new approach, retention rates have improved by 10 per cent in only four months.

47. As well as informing specific evaluation projects, such as the early-leaver project, data on the achievements and destinations of trainees are used on a monthly basis when management decisions and improvements to training programmes are being discussed. There are currently two systems for recording these data. One is a relatively new CCTE system installed in Aston's offices and the other is a well-established in-house system. Currently, the CCTE system is used to check the accuracy of the in-house system, but it is planned, by the CCTE, that a more comprehensive range of reports will soon be available from this system. The in-house system records the start date of the trainee, the date the trainee gained employment, their progress towards the NVQ, the expected and actual leaving dates and the reasons for leaving. From these data, the company produces a variety of reports for different employees and for different reasons. The training team are able to monitor progress, the recruitment team are able to evaluate the time taken to gain employment and the management team are able to consider the reasons for leaving which they consider when planning changes to the programme. Detailed financial reports are also produced for the partners, as are reports for quarterly contract performance review meetings with the CCTE.