



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT AUGUST 2000

## GR & MM Blackledge Plc

## SUMMARY

GR & MM Blackledge provides satisfactory work-based training in retailing for young people. Excellent use is made of workplace evidence in trainees' portfolios. The retention and achievement rates for modern apprentices are low. There is a good awareness of equal opportunities among trainees. Trainees are well supported in the workplace and their progress is monitored through effective progress reviews but initial assessment is not routinely conducted. Workplace managers are actively involved in the training and have established good links with the off-the-job training staff. The role of the trainer, however, is not clearly defined. The quality of workplace training is well monitored. Feedback from store managers and trainees is used to bring about improvements.

### GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Retailing & customer service	3

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

### KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ good training and assessment
- ◆ highly effective review process
- ◆ good awareness of equal opportunities among trainees
- ◆ excellent co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training
- ◆ high level of involvement of workplace managers
- ◆ comprehensive and thorough internal verification
- ◆ systematic sharing of good practice

### KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ low achievement and retention rates for modern apprentices
- ◆ slow progress in key skills achievement
- ◆ insufficient initial assessment
- ◆ lack of clear role definition for the trainer

## INTRODUCTION

1. GR & MM Blackledge is a retailer of toiletries and health and beauty products. The company was founded in 1970 in Leyland with two employees. Currently, there are 1,177 employees and a total of 84 retail stores across the UK. The board of directors of the company consists of the two founders and two others. The staffing level in the stores varies from 10 to 30. The company's head office has been in Bamber Bridge, south of Preston since 1996.

2. The company has a direct contract with Lancashire Area West Training and Enterprise Council (LAWTEC) for work-based training for young people. This training is mainly in stores in Lancashire. The training scheme started in January 1997 with a group of seven modern apprentices based in stores in Preston, Chorley, Barrow and Stretford. The aim of the training is to meet the needs of the company by increasing the number of young people progressing from the position of sales assistants to supervisory or management roles. The off-the-job training is based in a training centre in the company's head office. At present, trainees are located in stores within a reasonable travelling distance of the training centre. At the time of the inspection, there were 11 trainees based in retail stores across the LAWTEC area. The stores are located in Blackpool, Chorley, Kendal, Leyland, Poulton-le-Fylde and Preston. The contract with LAWTEC is supporting five modern apprentices and six national trainees in retail operations. The company employs approximately 50 other trainees based in retail stores across the UK. Government funding for this training is accessed by other private training providers and GR & MM Blackledge provides work placements.

3. The LAWTEC area has a population of approximately 930,000. In the 1995 employment survey, 16.8 per cent of the population were employed in the wholesale and retail trade. The area is relatively prosperous with unemployment slightly lower than the national average of 3.5 per cent in July 2000. The percentage of unemployed people who are aged 18 to 24 years in the Northwest was 19.8 compared with the national figure of 23.6 per cent in July 2000. In the 1991 census, minority ethnic groups in the LAWTEC area represented 2.3 per cent of the working age population compared with the national figure of 6.4 per cent. In Preston the non-white population was identified as 10.2 per cent in the 1991 census.

4. In 1999, the percentage of school leavers in the LAWTEC area achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 0.2 per cent lower than the national average of 47.9 per cent. The area had 66 per cent of 16 year olds continuing in full-time education compared with the national figure of 69 per cent. Twelve per cent of 16 year olds in the LAWTEC area progressed into government-funded training. This is slightly higher than the national figure of 10 per cent.

## INSPECTION FINDINGS

5. The company's management accountant completed the first self-assessment report on the training programme two months prior to the inspection. Area managers and store managers were involved in the self-assessment process through their bi-monthly meetings. The views of trainees were obtained through the use of questionnaires. The company directors were consulted on the content of the report. Each section of the report included an introduction describing the procedures involved. The strengths and weaknesses were clearly stated and referenced to appropriate sources of evidence.

6. Two inspectors spent a total of six days with GR & MM Blackledge in August 2000. The occupational area of retailing and customer service was inspected. Inspectors interviewed 10 of the 11 trainees and made four visits to trainees' workplaces. They met the regional and area managers and four store managers. Interviews were conducted with the trainer/assessor and the internal verifier. Two interviews were conducted with senior staff from the company. Ten trainees' files and 15 portfolios were examined. Other documents reviewed included contracts, external verifiers' reports, health and safety and equal opportunities policies, training materials, minutes of meetings and files of management and quality assurance evidence. One assessment, two reviews and two training sessions were observed and graded.

Grades awarded to training, review and assessment sessions

	GRADE 1	GRADE 2	GRADE 3	GRADE 4	GRADE 5	TOTAL
Retailing & customer service	4	1				5
<b>Total</b>	4	1	0	0	0	5

## OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

### Retailing & customer service

**Grade 3**

7. There are 11 trainees in this occupational area. All trainees are full-time employees of GR & MM Blackledge and are based in retail stores in northwest Lancashire. Five trainees are on modern apprenticeships working towards an NVQ in retailing at level 3 and six are on national traineeships working towards a level 2 NVQ in retailing. Trainees' on-the-job training is the responsibility of each store manager. Trainees attend off-the-job training for one day every two weeks at a training centre in the company's head office. Each off-the-job training session is designed to provide the knowledge trainees require for their workplace and guidance on how to generate evidence of their competence. A company employee is the sole trainer and assessor. This employee provides the off-the-job training and carries out assessments and reviews in the workplace. The trainer is qualified in training and assessment and is experienced in the occupational area. Inspectors

identified additional strengths and weaknesses to those in the self-assessment report and awarded a lower grade than the one given in the report.

### STRENGTHS

- ◆ good training and assessment
- ◆ excellent portfolios
- ◆ trainees' thorough understanding of programmes
- ◆ good links between theory and practice

### WEAKNESSES

- ◆ low achievement and retention rates for modern apprentices
- ◆ slow achievement of key skills

#### GOOD PRACTICE

*Trainees are given an opportunity to visit the main distribution warehouse and work in different stores that have a higher turnover and a different range of products. This allows trainees to experience different ranges of products and learn how distribution fits in to the retail supply chain.*

8. Off-the-job training provides the specific knowledge requirements for the trainees. Trainees are given detailed and comprehensive handouts and open-learning materials during the training to reinforce the knowledge and understanding gained in the workplace. Training sessions are lively, interactive and are tailored to the individuals' needs. The training is directly linked to particular units of the NVQ and is related effectively to the trainees' current work-based activities and the on-the-job training plan. The off-the-job sessions also involve progress reviews, the development of portfolios, assessment planning and the identification of opportunities to generate evidence in the workplace. Reviews and assessments are carried out every week in the workplace by the trainer. Preparation for assessment is planned systematically with each trainee. NVQ units and relevant evidence identified by trainees are discussed in detail. A variety of assessment methods are used including results of workplace activity, personal statements, witness testimony and direct observations. Opportunities to use naturally occurring evidence in the workplace are encouraged. The trainer has a good understanding of each trainee's roles and responsibilities within their respective workplace. They are given good advice and guidance on how to obtain evidence for future assessment. The assessment action plan is completed and agreed and signed by both the trainer and trainee. The trainee and the trainer keep copies. Following assessment the trainee is given constructive feedback.

9. The standard of portfolio work is exceptional. Trainees take pride in the way portfolios are presented and organised. All evidence directly relates to the trainees' work experience and each piece of evidence is labelled and cross-referenced to the NVQ standards. Trainees have a thorough understanding of the programme, the NVQ standards and relevance of the evidence gathered against occupational units. Evidence is appropriately indexed and referenced and is organised by the trainees themselves to meet their own individual needs. Trainees take responsibility for their action planning and they are well prepared with the required evidence before planned assessments.

10. Achievement rates on the modern apprenticeship programme are low. A total of 23 trainees have started a modern apprenticeship. Three of these trainees

entered with a level 2 qualification. Of these, one is still in training and the other two left for other employment without gaining further qualifications. Thirty per cent (six) of the 20 direct-entry trainees left with no qualifications. Two of these trainees became pregnant, one changed to training in care and one moved to Wales. Sixty-five per cent (13) of the direct-entry trainees achieved a level 2 qualification. Two of these trainees remained as employees of the company but transferred to another training provider owing to the excessive travel for off-the-job training. Following achievement of the level 2 NVQ seven trainees left training. One became pregnant and has since returned to work in retailing. Three took employment in other areas and three gained supervisor posts in retail stores. One trainee attained level 3 and left training to take a retail supervisor post in another store. Three of those who achieved level 2 are still in training. One of these trainees has completed the full individual training plan but is awaiting final certification of the level 3 NVQ and key skills.

11. The last recruitment to the modern apprentice programme was in October 1998. Since July 1999, all recruitment has been onto national traineeships. Out of the nine national trainees who started the programme three have left, giving an overall retention rate of 66 per cent. Two trainees have achieved an NVQ at level 2 in retail operations, two others are close to completion and the other two have completed over half of the units required.

12. None of the national trainees have completed their key skills requirements. Progress in achieving key skills has been slow having only recently been fully integrated with the assessment of occupational units. Work-based managers now realise the importance of key skills in the programmes. Store managers and the trainer have recently developed a programme to fully integrate key skills into the national trainees' work. Trainees are now actively encouraged to use real work activities to produce evidence towards their key skills. There has been inadequate assessment of key skills for some of the modern apprentices.

## GENERIC AREAS

### Equal opportunities

### Grade 2

13. The operations director holds responsibility for equal opportunities within GR & MM Blackledge plc. The company policy is set by the board of directors and is subject to annual review. The last revision was in July 2000. All new staff, including trainees are provided with a copy of the company's equal opportunities policy and procedures and the company's handbook during their induction programme. The policy is displayed on noticeboards in staff rooms of the retail stores and in the training centre. The handbook includes details of the company's grievance procedure for employees. During the induction process for trainees within the retail store an equal opportunities training session is undertaken with the line manager. At the time of the inspection the total number of full- and part-time company employees across the whole of the UK was 1,177. Eighty-nine per cent of the employees are women and 4 per cent are from minority ethnic communities. The self-assessment report identified two strengths and one

weakness. Inspectors did not consider either of the identified strengths as significant but found others. Inspectors expanded on the identified weakness. The grade awarded by inspectors was higher than that given in the self-assessment report.

### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ good awareness of equal opportunities among trainees
- ◆ active monitoring in the workplace
- ◆ good opportunities for job development for trainees

### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ lack of targeting of under-represented groups

14. Trainees have a good understanding of equal opportunities. They understand how discrimination may occur and have received clear guidance on their responsibility to ensure that colleagues and customers are treated with respect. Trainees are fully aware of the procedures to follow if they have concerns about discriminatory practice. The staff-induction process in the retail stores involves a checklist for the manager to confirm that detailed individual discussion on equal opportunities takes place. The trainees' understanding of equal opportunities is developed by a further two-hour session as part of the off-the-job training induction programme. In the weeks preceding the inspection all trainees attended an all-day off-the-job training session on a wide range of equal opportunities issues.

15. The managers in the retail stores take particular care to monitor conformity to equal opportunities policies as they affect trainees. During the quarterly reviews for trainees, the company trainer discusses equal opportunities within the workplace. The trainer has experience and knowledge of equal opportunities issues and provides additional guidance and support to trainees and their line managers. During their fortnightly monitoring visits to the retail stores, the area managers check compliance with the company's policy and procedures. The company applies a strict dress code for employees. Recently the company waived the code in the case of a woman employee on the grounds of religious conformity.

16. Some modern apprentices have attained supervisory status in the retail stores. This includes day-to-day management of staff and involvement in the selection process. The position requires the apprentice to undertake the induction of new employees, including the provision of guidance on equal opportunities. National trainees take this role during the induction for some part-time employees. Trainees are given guidance and the opportunity to apply for any of the advertised supervisory posts in the company's chain of retail stores.

17. A total of 32 trainees have started on the training scheme. None of the trainees was from a minority ethnic background and there has been only one male trainee who left the programme after 15 months and moved to a different part of the UK.

The company does not promote the training opportunities to under-represented groups. The company uses local careers offices to recruit prospective candidates for work-based training. The company has not monitored or attempted to influence the recruitment strategy of the outside agency.

18. Analysis of data from the last recruitment stage revealed that 33 per cent of applicants were men, all of whom were invited for interview but only eight attended. Two men were offered posts but failed to attend. Only one of the total 93 applications was from a member of minority ethnic groups.

## **Trainee support**

## **Grade 2**

19. Trainees are recruited either through the local careers office or through personal recommendations of store managers following part-time employment. All applicants are interviewed and given an initial assessment covering aspects of retail work and their potential ability to deal with customers. Prior learning and experience are discussed. The store manager who manages the on-the-job training provides an induction to the company and to the workplace. Trainees receive a second induction from the company trainer which covers the training programme, health and safety, equal opportunities and roles and responsibilities. This induction is staged across the first four weeks of day-release off-the-job training. The trainer supports trainees throughout the period of their training. The trainer meets them when they attend the training centre on a fortnightly basis. The trainer also visits trainees in the workplace on a weekly basis to review their progress, carry out assessments and discuss their progress with their respective store manager. The self-assessment report identified five strengths and one weakness. Inspectors agreed with some of the identified strengths. Inspectors found further strengths and weaknesses and awarded the same grade as that given in the report.

### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ highly effective review process
- ◆ high level of pastoral support
- ◆ good advice to potential trainees

### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ insufficient initial assessment
- ◆ insufficient recognition of prior achievement

20. The review process is comprehensive and thorough. Trainees' work-based managers carry out reviews on a monthly basis relating to on-the-job training and the trainer undertakes weekly reviews which cover both on- and off-the-job training. In addition to this the area manager, in conjunction with the trainer, does a quarterly review to ensure that managers are supporting trainees in accordance with the detailed company training manual. In each case, the reviews involve the trainee, the workplace manager and/or the area manager and the trainer. The



reviews cover the trainees' progress and achievements to date and comprehensive action-planning for the next review period. The reviews are also used to obtain feedback from trainees, evaluate the whole training process and make recommendations for improvement.

21. The trainer visits trainees in the workplace every week and also sees the trainees when they attend the off-the-job training. This frequency far exceeds the requirements of LAWTEC's contract. The trainer is available to discuss any concerns the trainee has, or any specific need or additional support required, even outside normal working hours. Both the trainees and workplace managers have commented on the benefit of the frequency of the visits. The trainees value the additional support provided. If a trainee has fallen behind for personal reasons or while on holiday, additional support is given to help trainees to catch up with work outstanding and to meet the set targets.

22. Before any trainee starts the training programme they are given impartial advice on the nature and content of the training. They are given a detailed explanation of the retail work activities they would be involved in and what is expected from them. Some trainees are given experience by working in the store for a few weeks to see if they are suited to the retail sector. Parents of potential trainees are invited to the initial interview and are encouraged to contribute to the selection and recruitment process.

23. Initial assessment of key skills and initial identification of trainees' additional learning support is inadequate. There is no diagnostic testing of trainees on interview or induction to determine whether any trainee requires additional support with their learning or what key skills they have. It is not until trainees are well into their training programme that the store manager or trainer is able to establish that a trainee may require additional support. Once any special need has been identified, the managers and the trainer provide satisfactory support for the individual trainee's needs.

24. Prior experience gained in a retail environment is discussed and tested on induction. This is not always sufficiently recognised and accredited against the NVQ trainees are working towards. Some trainees had worked in the same store for six to nine months before starting the normal training programme.

## **Management of training**

## **Grade 2**

25. The regional and local area managers of the retail company have overall responsibility for the management of the training. The day-to-day responsibility for the training is delegated to the local store managers. Managers of stores supporting trainees and regional and area managers are involved in quarterly meetings chaired by the company's trainer. The company's management accountant has line-management responsibility for the trainer. Training policy is set by the company at board level. The board meets on a monthly basis and when training issues are discussed the management accountant and regional manager attend. The self-assessment report identified strengths with which inspectors agreed. The identified

weakness on retention of trainees was considered by inspectors in the occupational sector. Inspectors found other strengths and weaknesses and awarded the same grade as that given in the report.

### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ excellent co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training
- ◆ high level of involvement of workplace managers
- ◆ good internal communications

### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ lack of clear role definition for the trainer
- ◆ inadequate staff-appraisal process

26. On- and off-the-job training are well planned and complement each other effectively. On-the-job training is the responsibility of the trainee's work-based manager. Off-the-job training is the responsibility of the trainer. Communication between the store managers and the company trainer is excellent. The store managers are aware of the planned programme of off-the-job training. Both on- and off-the-job training focus on matching the NVQ requirements to the needs of the company. The trainee's manager systematically reviews the trainees' progress on a monthly basis against a company-training matrix that covers a diverse range of retail work-based activities. Any identified gaps in trainees' competence form the basis of a detailed action plan to meet the individual trainees' needs. The action plan is used by the trainee, in partnership with the company trainer to identify opportunities to generate evidence to claim competence against the NVQ. Following the fortnightly off-the-job training sessions, most of the store managers have a discussion with their trainees to establish what areas of store activity are most relevant to support the learning process.

27. The trainer makes weekly visits to trainees and managers in each of the retail stores. During these visits, the managers are involved in the informal discussions on trainees' progress and identification of training needs. The store managers' involvement and understanding of the NVQ process has gradually developed over the three years of the training programme. Their understanding of key skills is a recent development. Store managers accept responsibility for assisting trainees with the production of portfolio evidence based on their on-the-job training. In addition to day-release attendance at the training centre, trainees are commonly given several hours each week to work on their portfolios in the store. Store managers provide a wide range of learning opportunities for the trainees, including supervision of part-time employees. Store managers are actively involved in providing witness testimony. One store manager has an assessor qualification but does not assess in the workplace.

28. The frequent informal meetings between the company trainer, store managers and trainees assist good communications. The area and regional managers of the company make fortnightly visits to each of the stores and they meet with each of

the trainees to discuss progress. These senior managers are well informed of any issues related to trainees' progress. The quarterly management meetings on training provide further opportunities for effective communication between all parties involved in the training.

29. The trainer meets informally with her line manager on a weekly basis. The trainer makes her own informal notes of the discussions. The discussions focus on trainees' progress and agreement on appropriate action-planning. The area manager visits the training centre on a weekly basis for informal discussions on trainees' progress with the trainer and her line manager.

30. The role of the trainer is not clearly defined. There is no current job description with identified accountabilities. Since the post-holder was appointed in October 1997 there have been significant changes in the tasks performed. These changes have not been adequately recorded.

31. At the time of the inspection, the retail company did not have a formal staff appraisal process for any of the staff involved in the delivery or management of training. There are no formal targets set for the trainer/assessor post holder. Performance monitoring for the trainer/assessor is currently informal and not recorded.

## Quality assurance

## Grade 2

32. Quality assurance of the training is the responsibility of the regional and area managers. The quality assurance arrangements for the single occupational sector that currently comprises 11 trainees are mainly informal. The company meets the formal requirements of the external awarding body for the retail qualifications. The self-assessment report identified two strengths and one weakness. Inspectors agreed with the strengths and found others. Inspectors identified two weaknesses and awarded a grade higher than that given in the self-assessment report.

### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ comprehensive and thorough internal verification
- ◆ systematic sharing of good practice
- ◆ effective monitoring of on-the-job training
- ◆ responsiveness to trainees' feedback

### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ insufficient monitoring of off-the-job training
- ◆ lack of comprehensive, written quality assurance arrangements

33. A well-qualified and experienced person conducts internal verification of the awards. Internal verification is comprehensive and thorough. Assessment decisions

and practices are sampled on a continual basis and findings are acted upon to ensure consistency and fairness. Trainees are aware that unit certification is available if they leave the programme early. Trainees are clear about the role of internal verification. Written records of internal verification are thorough and up to date. Records provide a clear audit trail from enrolment to certification. There is mutual recognition by the trainer and internal verifier of each other's roles and responsibilities. Trainer and verifier have frequent telephone contact. The verifier visits the training centre or the workplace at approximately eight-week intervals. Trainees are interviewed and the internal verifier acts upon their feedback. The assessor is well supported by the verifier.

34. The quarterly meetings of store managers, area manager and the trainer provide a forum for open discussion on the training programmes. These meetings have been held since early 1999 but their effectiveness has been particularly pronounced over the last nine months. The meetings provide an opportunity for managers and the trainer to identify and share good practice and to establish agreed procedures across the six stores involved in the training scheme. This forum is partly responsible for the current high level of involvement of the store managers in the NVQ training programmes.

35. Following the start of the apprentice training scheme the retail company developed a training manual for all employees. The manual clearly identifies the company standard on how each job in a store should be performed. Store managers and area managers monitor the performance of all staff against the company standards. Area managers make fortnightly visits to the stores to monitor staff performance and to observe on-the-job training. Verbal feedback is given to the store managers and to the company trainer if a trainee's performance is in need of further development.

36. During the fortnightly visits to the stores, the area manager obtains verbal and written feedback from the trainees on the effectiveness of their training programme. Prior to each quarterly review, trainees are asked to complete a two-page questionnaire. The questions give trainees the opportunity to evaluate the support received from their manager and trainer/assessor and to identify skill areas in need of development. The results gathered from these feedback mechanisms have been used to identify areas for improvement for individual trainees and for the training programme as a whole. Modifications have been made to the off-the-job training programme in response to trainees' feedback.

37. There are no written arrangements for monitoring, by observation, the off-the-job training. The internal verifier has observed some off-the-job training but this did not result in any form of written feedback to the trainer.

38. The company has not produced a comprehensive set of procedures for all aspects of the training programme. The standard of performance and the procedures to be followed for initial assessment, induction, reviews, off-the-job training and assessment are not clearly identified. There are, however, clear procedures for the internal verification process.



39. The self-assessment process involved the company's managers, trainer and trainees. Strengths and weaknesses were clearly related to sources of evidence. The report was not comprehensive and the evaluations were not always soundly based. Inspectors identified additional strengths and weaknesses in several aspects of training and agreed with only two of the five grades given in the report.