



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT SEPTEMBER 1999

REINSPECTION NOVEMBER 2000

ASSA
Training and
Development Limited

SUMMARY

ASSA Training and Development Limited provides training for young people in manufacturing, engineering and business administration and information technology. The manufacturing training is of a good standard, with many trainees and clients finding employment as a result. Engineering and business administration programmes are satisfactory, with good retention of trainees and good resources. At the first inspection, equal opportunities was underdeveloped in the organisation and not effectively promoted. ASSA is now actively promoting equal opportunities within the organisation and giving assistance to disadvantaged people in the Northeast region. Trainees are supported through good initial assessment, and residential training offers effective team-building skills. However, key skills training and trainees' reviews are not adequately covered. On- and off-the-job training is well managed. There is a lack of systems to ensure that management tasks are completed, for example that service level agreements have been signed. Quality assurance is underdeveloped in the organisation. Much work has been done with employers to improve the relevance of qualifications in line with industry requirements.

As a result of the reinspection of ASSA Training and Development Limited, the original published report text for equal opportunities has been replaced by new text which makes reference to the original inspection findings. This summary page, the overall report introduction and the inspection findings introduction have also been amended to reflect the findings of the reinspection. All other sections of the original published report, which have not been subject to full reinspection, have been left in their original form.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Engineering	3
Manufacturing	2
Business administration	3

GENERIC AREAS	GRADE
Equal opportunities	4
Trainee support	2
Management of training	3
Quality assurance	3

REINSPECTION	GRADE
Equal opportunities	3

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ good on- and off-the-job training and resources
- ◆ excellent liaison between all stakeholders
- ◆ high percentage of New Deal clients obtaining employment
- ◆ good preparation for work provided by initial training
- ◆ excellent retention, progression and achievement rates among trainees



- ◆ customised training programmes
- ◆ detailed subcontractor service level agreements
- ◆ active internal promotion of equality of opportunity issues

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ underdeveloped monitoring of trainees' progress
- ◆ lack of rigorous NVQ assessment
- ◆ missed opportunities for work-based training and assessment
- ◆ insufficient monitoring of equality of opportunity
- ◆ key skills training and integration with NVQs not established
- ◆ failure of review procedures to meet contractual requirements
- ◆ lack of monitoring by management
- ◆ underdeveloped quality assurance operations

INTRODUCTION

1. ASSA Training and Development Limited (Automotive Sector Strategic Alliance) was established as a company limited by guarantee in April 1997. The initial idea for ASSA was discussed with the board of directors of an international motor manufacturing company and Sunderland City Training and Enterprise Council (TEC). ASSA was set up to meet the training needs in the area created as a result of the recently established car plant in Sunderland. At the time of the first inspection, there were 54 member companies of ASSA, which met quarterly to address common concerns and challenges. Between them, these 54 companies employed 25,000 people. At the time of reinspection, this number had increased to 57 member companies.

2. The automotive manufacturing business in the Northeast of England has grown as a result of the establishment of an international motor manufacturing company's car plant approximately 13 years ago. This offered business opportunities for automotive component manufacturers in the area. ASSA's main aim is to develop skills in the sector to retain a successful industry and its accompanying social and economic benefits. ASSA is also involved in helping to increase and train the workforces of local businesses, in line with the perceived skills needs for 2000 and beyond. ASSA has developed training programmes for young people with this aim. It contracts with the City of Sunderland TEC to provide training for young people in engineering, manufacturing, business administration and information technology. At the first inspection there were 459 trainees on either modern apprenticeships or national traineeship programmes and 130 New Deal clients. ASSA has a contract with the Employment Service to train New Deal clients through the full-time education and training option for manufacturing jobs in the Northeast of England. At the time of the reinspection in November 2000, there were 114 advanced modern apprentices and 44 New Deal clients on the full-time education and training option.

3. Unemployment in the Sunderland area in September 1999 was 17 per cent, which was high compared with the national average of 4.1 per cent. In November 2000, the proportion of unemployed people in the Sunderland area is 6.8 per cent compared to the national average figure of 3.9 per cent. Sunderland has a low proportion of people from minority ethnic groups compared with other parts of the country, at 1 per cent when last measured, for the 1991 census. In 1998, the proportion of school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 34 per cent, compared with the national average of 46.3 per cent. For the period 1999-2000, the proportion of school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above is 38.4 per cent, compared with the national average of 47.9 per cent.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

4. ASSA completed its first self-assessment report in February 1999. This was updated in July 1999 in preparation for inspection by the Training Standards Council. The report identified strengths and weaknesses, many of which were agreed on by inspectors. However, some of the strengths were considered to be no more than normal practice. Inspectors identified additional strengths and weaknesses. An updated report and action plan was produced in August 2000 for the reinspection. The report was produced with the help of staff, measuring progress made against the company action plan to correct the original strengths and weaknesses. This process identified new strengths and weaknesses. A further update was provided for the reinspection in November 2000 with the latest information about the company and its programmes and progress towards completing the action plan.

5. The first inspection was carried out by a team of seven inspectors, who spent a total of 28 days at ASSA during September 1999. They examined management files, trainees' achievement data, trainees' personal files and trainees' portfolios. In total, 77 trainees were interviewed. Inspectors visited 19 work placements and interviewed 18 employers' representatives, visited nine subcontractors and interviewed 11 staff. They also observed six training sessions and six progress reviews.

6. The reinspection was carried out by a team of two inspectors over a total of four days in November 2000. They conducted four interviews with members of the training providers' staff, interviewed 12 trainees and two employers and visited three employers' sites. They examined documents relating to trainees, including agreements with subcontractors, staff and trainees' handbooks, policies, procedures, marketing materials and other training and equal opportunities related documents.

Grades awarded to instruction sessions at the first inspection

	GRADE 1	GRADE 2	GRADE 3	GRADE 4	GRADE 5	TOTAL
Engineering	1	2				3
Manufacturing			1			1
Business administration			2			2
Total	1	2	3	0	0	6

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Engineering

Grade 3

7. The engineering training at ASSA is managed by a senior trainee programmes manager supported by two technical officers. Trainees are either employed by ASSA or directly by companies who are members of ASSA. There is a total of 96 engineering trainees, comprising 92 modern apprentices and four national trainees. Nineteen trainees are working towards a national vocational qualification (NVQ) at level 2 in engineering foundation award and the remainder towards an NVQ at level 3 in engineering system maintenance. The level 2 NVQ is subcontracted to one of two local colleges. For the first college term they attend full time, while they work towards their NVQ for four days and study theoretical knowledge for the remaining day of the week. From January to April trainees return to the workplace for practical training but attend college to continue with their academic studies. After this on-the-job training, trainees resume full-time attendance at the college where they work towards the completion of their level 2 NVQ. On completion of the first year of their training, trainees are based in the workplace and work towards their level 3 NVQ. They also continue with their theory training. The level 3 NVQ programme is an industry-driven pilot scheme qualification, and is awaiting ratification by the lead body. The modern apprenticeship is scheduled to take four and a half years to complete. Inspectors identified different strengths and weaknesses to those cited in the self-assessment report and awarded the same grade as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good on- and off-the-job training and resources
- ◆ excellent liaison between all stakeholders
- ◆ high retention rates

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ underdeveloped monitoring of trainees' progress
- ◆ completion of level 2 NVQ delayed for some trainees

8. Trainees learn through a combination of experiencing real work on the job and support off the job from colleges. Trainees can transfer between departments and gain experience at other sites to meet the full requirements of their multi-skilled programme. On site, trainees use modern equipment and are supervised by various experienced staff until they are judged to be competent in the activity. Subcontractors offer excellent facilities for training and their qualified staff carry out training off site. Trainees are allocated their own tools and a dedicated work

area during the off-the-job training period. Formal training sessions are good, well paced and health and safety are emphasised at all relevant stages.

9. Induction combines essential programme information with team building activities. Trainees enjoy the team-building programme and feedback from employers indicates that trainees demonstrate an improvement in communication skills and working as part of a team. Training days are set aside for workplace supervisors to help trainees to understand the relevance of the NVQ requirements to the workplace activities. Trainees' competence is recorded for each unit of the qualification. Half a day each week is allocated for trainees to complete their logbook entries, which supervisors review during a formal interview. During the early stages of training, ASSA carries out weekly reviews designed to ensure that trainees understand the training they have received so far and to help speed up their progress. The company holds formal monthly reviews to monitor trainees' progress. Trainees are encouraged to gain additional qualifications, which can lead to a degree-level award.

10. The qualification takes the form of a multi-skilled programme which was developed in conjunction with major UK automotive companies. All member stakeholders have approved the format and content as meeting their apprenticeship skill requirements. The agreement on the format of the qualification was reached at forum meetings at which training and development issues are discussed. These meetings also maintain good working relationships between ASSA and the member companies.

11. Retention of trainees on this programme is good. The quality of training, prospects for trainees and in-company support is good and only one trainee has left the modern apprenticeship programme, resulting in a retention rate of 99 per cent of the total intake of trainees.

12. ASSA does not yet fully control the monitoring of trainees' progress on the level 3 qualification. The number of trainees and their progress towards completion cannot be effectively accessed using the current systems. Unit accreditation for trainees is not available because of the lack of workplace assessors and verification. It is planned to carry out formal assessment at the end of the programme. Supervisors monitor trainees' progress in the workplace and provide witness testimony, which is the main source of evidence in trainees' portfolios. There is a lack of variety in the assessment methods used. Integration of key skills training with the main vocational programme is not fully established at either level 2 or level 3.

13. Eighteen trainees who completed the first year of their off-the-job training in 1998 have not yet received their level 2 awards. The delay has been caused by lack of evidence of their competence, late registration of the trainees with the awarding body and an inconsistent standard of assessment. This has led to some trainees having to do additional work to meet the NVQ standards and lost production time at member companies who have had to release trainees for additional work on gathering their evidence.

14. After completion of their level 2 NVQ, modern apprentices work towards a pilot qualification at level 3, which has not yet been ratified by the lead body. However, trainees are also registered on an engineering maintenance NVQ level 3 programme with which they will be credited if accreditation of the pilot scheme is excessively delayed. ASSA and the international motor manufacturing company instigated setting up the pilot qualification as it more accurately reflects the type of work carried out in a modern car production plant and the lead body has indicated that recognition of the new award is imminent.

Manufacturing

Grade 2

15. ASSA has 459 manufacturing trainees comprising of 130 New Deal clients, and 329 national trainees. Approximately two-thirds of the trainees are on six-month performing manufacturing operations programmes and the rest are on a two-year programme for the same qualification. Trainees on the six-month programme are employed and are given either a one-week or three-week induction depending upon their skills. The rest of their programme is in the workplace. Subcontracted staff carry out NVQ assessments. Trainees on the two-year programme are employed by ASSA, and initially undertake nine months' full-time skills training at a subcontracted college. Trainees then move into the workplace where they undertake an NVQ at level 2 in performing manufacturing operations. Subcontracted staff carry out all assessment in the workplace. The New Deal clients are on the full-time education and training option. Clients join on a 20-week rolling start programme, and initially go through the ASSA induction stage, before starting on NVQs at level 2 in performing manufacturing operations in one of two subcontracted centres. Staff at these centres carry out the training and assessment. The NVQ followed is level 2 engineering manufacture (foundation). Of the 114 national trainees pursuing the level 1 NVQ in repair and servicing of road vehicles, 84 per cent achieved their qualification. New trainees work towards the level 1 NVQ in performing manufacturing operations. The New Deal programme was started in March 1998. In its self-assessment report, the company did not clearly identify all its strengths and weaknesses. Inspectors awarded a higher grade than given by the company.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ high percentage of New Deal clients obtain employment
- ◆ dedicated New Deal training facilities and resources
- ◆ good links between on- and off-the-job training
- ◆ all national trainees are employed
- ◆ initial training provides good preparation for work

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of rigorous assessment
- ◆ ineffective review procedures

16. Potential employers use selection tests to help them to recruit the best national trainees for their work. Tests used are normally commercially available tests in numeracy and literacy and a skills test. Successful trainees on the two-year programme are employed by ASSA, and spend the first nine months off the job at a subcontracted college. Resources are excellent. There are facilities for trainees to work on engines, bodywork, and parts-replacement aspects of modern motor vehicles. The resources here mirror those in local companies and, in most cases, are supplied by them. Training is of a high standard, helping to prepare the trainees for actual work situations within the companies. Trainees also undertake three 'taster' visits to the workplace where they can gain experience in different areas of the plant. The links with local companies are very strong, which enables ASSA to adapt training at short notice to suit the companies' needs. It also enables ASSA to link the training to what is currently being done in the workplace. While at college, trainees complete the NVQ level 1 in servicing and repair of motor vehicles, and in the second year, level 2 in performing manufacturing operations. Trainees are provided with time at work for portfolio-building, with visits from the subcontracted assessor every two or three months. Trainees are also given guidance on evidence collection and its suitability for the qualification.

17. The trainees on a six-month programme are employed, and have undertaken a comprehensive one- or three-week induction and skills assessment dependant upon their level of skills acquisition. The initial skills assessment and induction period is conducted off the job. Trainees are then moved into the workplace to start their performing manufacturing operations NVQ at level 2. College staff visit trainees in the workplace to carry out training and assessment for the qualification. During this time, trainees are employed and work in production areas.

18. The Employment Service advisors refer New Deal clients to ASSA via the initial Gateway stage, used to identify clients who may be suitable for working in manufacturing. Most of the clients are aged between 18 and 24, and have been out of work for six months or more. Clients attend ASSA's initial assessment stage, which consists of a full day of testing and group exercises to assess attitude and interpersonal skills. Commercial basic skill tests are carried out and clients must attain a minimum level and pass a medical before joining the programme. Clients with identified additional learning needs are referred back to the Employment Service for help with identified areas. Clients working on the 20-week programme attend one of two excellently equipped training centres, one of which has been specifically set up for the New Deal programme. The resources are excellent, with a fully equipped engineering centre and simulated manufacturing areas in which to practise assembly skills. This is done using employers' actual components and assemblies, and gives the trainees realistic work experience. During the first seven weeks, clients work towards four units of the NVQ. Suitable clients are able to

progress at a faster pace to enable them to move into employment quicker. Other clients who require more training work on assembly skills, and possibly further NVQ units. All clients who complete the programme obtain a minimum of four NVQ units, and most of those who have completed have obtained the full NVQ. Approximately 62 per cent of clients complete the programme, and 70 per cent of these are employed. Employers are pleased with the clients, and with the work ASSA has put in to prepare them for team working, creating a positive attitude towards work, and improving their practical skills. Employers also appreciate ASSA's ability to adapt training plans at short notice to suit their needs. Working relationships with employers are very good.

19. Some trainees are not aware of which NVQ they are doing, and do not fully understand the assessment process. Sometimes their progress is not recorded, which leaves trainees unsure of their progress and achievements. Some assessment procedures are not rigorously carried out. For example, trainees are observed and assessed in the workplace by subcontracted assessors, without their knowledge and without being given any feedback. Formal reviews are carried out infrequently. In some cases, reviews are only conducted every six months. Reviews do not contain any target-setting for the NVQ or provide any occupational guidance. No copy of the review documentation is given to trainees, and ASSA's staff are not involved in the reviews in the workplace.

Business administration

Grade 3

20. There are three modern apprentices and one national trainee on the administration programme, and 30 information technology modern apprentices. Twenty of these trainees are with one member of ASSA's employer forum; the others are with seven other forum members. The company subcontracts the training and assessment for the trainees to three local further education colleges. One college provides the training and assessment for the 30 modern apprentices in information technology. These modern apprentices work towards NVQs at levels 2 and 3 in information technology, information technology key skills at level 4 and the remaining key skills at level 3; and a national certificate (NC) in business information technology and a higher national certificate (HNC) in business information technology applications. The second further education college provides the training and assessment for the two modern apprentices and one national trainee in administration. These modern apprentices work towards NVQs at levels 2 and 3 in administration and the NC and HNC in business and finance. The third further education college provides the training and assessment for the national trainee in administration. The national trainee works towards an NVQ at level 2 in administration and key skills at level 2. During the academic year all trainees attend weekly off-the-job training sessions, either on a day-release or evening-only basis. The training sessions take place in well-resourced teaching rooms and information technology suites. The staff in the three colleges are well qualified to provide the various programmes. No trainees have yet completed their training programme. The self-assessment report contained most of the strengths

and weaknesses identified by inspectors who agreed with the self-assessment grade.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ excellent retention, progression and achievement by trainees
- ◆ additional qualifications, training and professional development available
- ◆ full involvement of stakeholders in training and development

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ missed opportunities for work-based training and assessment
- ◆ academic year restricts trainees' progress
- ◆ ineffective reviews

21. The trainees enter their programmes with good GCSE results. Only two trainees have left out of the 37 trainees who have registered since the programmes began. One was transferred to a manufacturing job in the same company and one was dismissed for disciplinary reasons. Of the 35 still on the programme, 27 have achieved both an NVQ at level 2 and a national certificate; two have achieved a national certificate and 14 have successfully completed year one of a higher national certificate. There are good relationships between trainees from different employers, and they are mutually supportive in team-working and team-building activities.

22. The ASSA employers' forum requires that all modern apprentices take a relevant higher national certificate. All information technology trainees who have been on the programme for one year have completed a national certificate and those who have been on the programme for two years have also completed the first year of a higher national certificate. Most of the forum members arrange additional training for their information technology modern apprentices in such areas as programming languages, hardware maintenance and network management. ASSA organises residential courses for introductory team-building activities. Trainees enjoy these courses and say they help to build co-operative relationships among them.

23. The three subcontracted colleges have good resources for off-the-job training. The information technology subcontractor has a good resource centre. It includes a classroom and open-learning facilities with industry-standard hardware and software. The off-the-job training for the information technology modern apprentices takes place in this centre. The college's staff, employers' representatives, staff from ASSA and trainees' representatives meet monthly to discuss the progress of the off-the-job training and developments of the programme. The minutes of these meetings show how actions are taken to address the immediate matter of how training is provided and longer-term issues of

programme development. The content of the training programme and methods of training have benefited from employers being involved in specifying job-role requirements and any associated training needs. ASSA's subcontractors and employers have redefined the programme design and content. Together they have approached awarding and validating bodies to have the new content and requirements of these programmes approved. Parents of trainees are involved through parents' evenings. When a trainee is recruited to the programme the trainee's parents are invited to a meeting where the trainee's and the company's expectations are outlined. When trainees achieve interim qualifications, parents are invited to an awards ceremony. Parents are contacted when necessary, to help to resolve issues which arise during the training programme.

24. There is an effective match between trainees' jobs and the qualifications they are working towards. The trainees have a wide scope for the collection of naturally occurring evidence. There are good opportunities for work-based training and assessment. Despite this, opportunities for work-based training and assessment are missed and college staff do not visit the trainees in the workplace at all. Little effort is made to plan on- and off-the-job training to suit individual trainees. No observation of their workplace competence or other forms of workplace assessment have taken place, although there are plans to introduce some assessment in the workplace in the near future. The development of key skills has been slow. The company is working on pilot schemes to define the relationship between key skills and NVQs. Trainees are not aware of the key skills requirements of their programme. They do not have copies of the key skills standards and no evidence has been collected to satisfy both the NVQ and key skills requirements. Trainees take part in a thorough six-monthly appraisal system. ASSA has used these appraisals to constitute trainees' reviews. However, these reviews have no focus on the training programme or NVQ assessment. There is no monitoring or review of trainees' progress and no action-planning and target-setting. In most cases, ASSA's staff do not conduct the appraisal/review and, in many cases, there is no representative of ASSA present.

25. Training and assessment activities are frequently set within the college's academic year. All off-the-job training and assessment activities begin during September and end in June. Training plans are not individual and trainees are not set challenging targets. Opportunities are missed to identify links between the NVQ and the further education qualification requirements of the programme, so that trainees do not have to attend similar off-the-job training sessions, and can use the same assessments for both qualifications. The lack of workplace assessment and natural observation of trainees' competence hamper internal verification. Internal and external verification is still set within the context of academic terms and years. Some trainees have waited up to 54 weeks to have their NVQ portfolio validated, others wait until the end of the academic year before getting their portfolio ready for submission for verification. The college's systems for reporting trainees' progress to employers and ASSA are underdeveloped and concentrate on absence, discipline and general performance. There is no system to monitor in detail their progress towards achieving the qualifications.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 3

26. The operations manager has overall responsibility for equal opportunities issues. ASSA has an equal opportunities policy which is communicated to all staff through the staff handbook and to trainees at their induction. Equal opportunities is a standing agenda item at meetings and the staff handbook refers to current legislation. ASSA has a harassment policy and complaints procedure, which is also covered during the induction process. The unemployed sector is specifically targeted for recruitment. Other disadvantaged groups, minority ethnic groups and people with disabilities are also targeted.

At the first inspection, the main weaknesses identified were:

- ◆ equal opportunities not fully established within the organisation
- ◆ no promotion of equal opportunities policy
- ◆ no reference to equal opportunities in subcontractors' service level agreements
- ◆ TEC equal opportunities targets not met

27. The action plan, produced following the first inspection, has resulted in effective progress of equal opportunities awareness and implementation across the organisation, reinforced the original strengths and rectified the previous weaknesses. ASSA's staff have received awareness training in equal opportunities issues. Staff meetings have equal opportunities as a fixed agenda item. ASSA's equal opportunities policy has been revised and copies sent to trainees, employers and subcontractors. Agreements with subcontractors have been modified to include equal opportunities. The TEC's equal opportunities targets are likely to be achieved this year. The most recent self-assessment report identified four strengths and two weaknesses. Inspectors agreed with two of the strengths concerning strategic targeting and taster courses and identified one additional strength. Of the two weaknesses, inspectors agreed with the one regarding the monitoring of subcontractors, and the other was found to have been rectified. Inspectors identified an additional weakness. Inspectors agreed with the grade given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ strategic targeting of unemployed individuals
- ◆ taster courses for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds
- ◆ good internal promotion of equality of opportunity issues

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ inadequate monitoring of subcontractors
- ◆ insufficient analysis of data

28. ASSA continues to target unemployed individuals to create a regional pool of skilled labour, mainly using the New Deal to achieve this. At the time of the reinspection, 396 New Deal clients had gained employment with a major employer or its subcontractors, an overall total of 73 per cent of trainees who have entered training. This compares with 213 who had entered employment by the time of the first inspection, and represent an increase of 86 per cent during a period of severe cutbacks in engineering and manufacture in the Northeast. Links have been established to encourage women to return to work and other local training providers have been specifically targeted through the Gateway to Work, in order to reach those groups having difficulty in finding work. Such groups are offered short periods of work experience with local employers. A major employer gives production-line trials to trainees for a one-to-two week period. Trainees are also offered work experience for between one and four weeks with other local employers. As well as giving work experience, the courses are used as a selection tool by employers to assess the suitability of trainees.

GOOD PRACTICE

Recently, ASSA recruited three Croatian refugees to training courses. All three have successfully completed their training, gaining four units of an NVQ at level 2 in engineering manufacturing, and have gained jobs. Other groups include armed forces resettlement and the probation and Employment Service.

29. Since the first inspection, the organisation has been more active in promoting equality of opportunity to staff and trainees. Minutes of assessors' meetings, information technology review team meetings and meetings with a major employer all have equal opportunities as a fixed agenda item. More recently, management forum meetings have also included equal opportunities as a standard agenda item. Since the first inspection, two members of staff have had equal opportunities awareness training which was organised by the local TEC. In addition to this, the same two members of staff have also undertaken training in understanding discrimination towards people with disabilities. One member of staff has also received awareness training in the legal aspects of this area. The same member of staff can also communicate through basic hand signing to trainees who have a hearing impairment. The staff handbook has been updated to include a reference to *The Disability Discrimination Act 1995*. The modified handbook has been issued to all existing members of staff and a grievance procedure is now included in the contract with new employees. Promotional material now refers to ASSA's equal opportunities policy, as does the headed notepaper of the organisation. Access for people with disabilities has improved since ASSA changed premises. Subcontractors' facilities are satisfactory. At the induction of trainees, greater emphasis is placed on grievance procedures and the equal opportunities policy. Trainees interviewed could differentiate between direct and indirect forms of discrimination and had a good knowledge of the fundamentals of ASSA's equal opportunities policy.

30. However, there is insufficient monitoring of equality of opportunity at subcontractors and employers' premises. An example was found during the reinspection where scant effort had been made by college staff to stop harassment of a trainee in a classroom environment. There were potentially offensive images displayed in some workplaces. The service level agreement with subcontractors has been recently modified to include a section on equal opportunities. The modified agreement will be phased in when agreements are due for renewal. In the meantime, ASSA has requested copies of employers and subcontractors' equal

opportunities policies. Of the 16 organisations involved, nine have complied and the remaining seven, which employ a small minority of trainees, are being recontacted for information. There is now a new equal opportunities section on the progress-review form.

31. There is no analysis of data comparing the numbers of people who enter training with those who apply for a training place. Similarly, there is no analysis of the numbers of trainees who gain employment and those who do not. The data gathered concern only the number of trainees gaining employment and how this figure compares with those entering training. There is no analysis of the characteristics of trainees during the training process. Customised computer software has recently been installed to produce this analysis but it is not used fully. During inspection, a request was made for comparative data between 1999 and 2000 regarding the ethnicity and the gender of trainees in training. The results showed an improvement towards achieving the TEC's targets. The number of women in training has risen from 1.6 per cent to 4.2 per cent and the proportion of people from minority ethnic groups has remained virtually at the same level of just over 3 per cent. ASSA was unaware of this positive shift regarding women in training until the reinspection.

Trainee support

Grade 2

32. All trainees are employed directly by ASSA or by current members of the forum. Trainees are usually recruited through advertising, but when direct enquiries come to ASSA, they are forwarded to whichever member companies are recruiting. There is little contact with the careers service, either for recruiting or at schools. Two of ASSA's staff are trained in psychometric recruitment testing; such tests are mainly used for New Deal clients. Modern apprentices, national trainees and New Deal clients all have an initial assessment of their literacy and numeracy skills. Practical skills are also assessed. Occasionally, those who fail the written tests are allowed to complete the skills test. Letters are sent to candidates inviting them for interviews, which are carried out by forum-company training officers and works supervisors. Entrants to the modern apprenticeship programme are required to have four GCSEs at grade C or above, including mathematics and one science subject. There are no specific guidelines for entry to the national traineeship programme, other than that candidates should pass the initial tests. New Deal clients are allowed slightly lower test results. Successful candidates start immediately on a New Deal option. All trainees and clients undergo a company medical before starting work. New Deal clients who do well on the tests are sent on a one-week trial in the company, while the other clients are given a three-week preparation programme before going on the trial period. Unsuccessful applicants for modern apprenticeships are sent a letter explaining why they are not presently suitable and are given feedback on their future training needs/job opportunities, for example, that they can be transferred to a national traineeship. Modern apprentices with four GCSEs, who are unsuccessful in the employers' tests and interviews, are kept on file at ASSA and are often offered employment by other members of the

forum. All trainees are assigned a mentor at ASSA and a telephone number to contact if they need help. At one subcontractor, all trainees pursuing a national certificate initially complete an engineering first certificate, as this helps them with their mathematics and science. These subjects have, in the past, caused problems for some trainees. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment grade.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ customised training programmes
- ◆ comprehensive initial assessment
- ◆ innovative and effective team-building programme
- ◆ parental involvement encouraged and achievement celebrated
- ◆ potential trainees matched to best available job opportunities

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of comprehensive induction
- ◆ lack of recording of trainee support
- ◆ review procedures do not meet contractual requirements

33. ASSA has developed a range of programmes specifically designed to respond to member companies' needs and the requirements of the automotive industry within the region. An example of such customisation is the NVQ level 3 in systems maintenance, designed to produce multi-skilled technicians, and which encompasses a further education element at national certificate level of 16.5 units. The training element of this provision has been revised as the result of industrial pressure, but not yet accredited. A further example is a staff training programme devised by ASSA and a forum member, offered last year, and which included an engineering manufacturing NVQ at level 2, key skills at level 2, pneumatics, robotics, programmable logic controllers, MIG welding and company-specific assembly training. The member company installed two welding robots at the subcontractor's premises to simulate the actual working conditions. A final example is the pre-employment 'hands on' training in a simulated manufacturing environment which is targeted at trainees wishing to work on production lines. Feedback from trainees indicates that such programmes meet their needs with respect to job relevance and learning interesting work skills.

34. Initial assessment is comprehensive and uses a good mix of tests. These involve numeracy, literacy and mechanically biased spatial recognition, as well as psychometric testing, where it is felt to be useful. Also, manual skills are tested and these are often company-specific and involve, for example, fitting components together or measuring manual dexterity. Interviewing is carried out at employers' premises by training officers from ASSA together with works supervisors under whom successful candidates would work. High retention rates and high employment rates underline the effectiveness of the initial assessment.

35. ASSA, being concerned about costs and the quality of the external training provided, has developed an outdoor training centre (Barhaugh Hall). All modern apprentices and national trainees attend for five days to undergo team-building exercises that are relevant to the workplace and the working environment. New Deal clients visit for a three-day period in their first week to complete similar exercises and return in the sixth week to develop their hand skills (to prepare for production runs) and further their self-development. Trainees enjoy this training and recognise the useful team-working skills it helps them to develop.

36. Parental involvement is positively encouraged. Parents' evenings are held to pass on information from ASSA and the employer about the commitment and workload necessary to enter and complete the training programmes. Award ceremonies are held at three major subcontractors to celebrate trainees' achievements and parents are invited. ASSA and a major employer donate a number of cash vouchers to the award winners.

37. Trainee support has a positive impact on progression since potential trainees are closely matched to the best available job opportunities. Potential modern apprentices who fail to obtain apprenticeships are directed to national traineeships and successful New Deal clients move into national traineeships. In addition, trainees have the opportunity to move from one occupational area to another. Trainees or clients who have additional learning needs make use of the specialist support available in college.

38. Good on- and off-the-job links are furthered by the wearing of corporate clothing in subcontractors' workshops, adhering to company rules while at subcontractors and using automotive-industry-style progress charts at employers and at subcontractors. Companies donate specialised equipment to subcontractors to aid simulated training.

39. Some areas of induction are not comprehensively covered. Trainees have little or no knowledge of equal opportunities and many on programmes requiring key skills are not aware of their existence. Similarly, trainees have a poor understanding of the NVQ process. Individual training plans meet contractual requirements, but they are not used to target achievements nor are they regularly updated.

40. ASSA's staff visit trainees at subcontractors on a weekly basis and companies with trainees within a six- to eight-week time span. Any discussions, however, which arise regarding training and welfare are not recorded. Information about this support cannot, therefore, be verified or referred to in the future.

41. Contractual arrangements require the trainees to have a progress review every 13 weeks. This is not being done for the majority of trainees, as six-monthly appraisals, based on the model of a major company, have been used in place of reviews. These appraisals contain little information on trainees' progress and do not set training targets for NVQs.

Management of training

Grade 3

42. ASSA employs 27 staff on a full-time basis. The company produces a business plan each year which involves managers and directors in projecting their aims and objectives for the following year. Team managers are set team objectives, which are in turn given to individual staff members as personal targets. The board of directors meets every month to review the company's progress and senior managers meet every month. These meetings are minuted, with agreed actions followed up at the next meeting to check if they have been carried out. Managers hold team meetings with their staff on a regular basis but these meetings are not minuted. All staff have current job descriptions and for new staff there is a comprehensive induction programme. ASSA was recognised as an Investor in People in March 1999. All staff and managers are well qualified to carry out their job roles. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessed grade for this aspect.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ staff objectives and individual targets regularly set and reviewed
- ◆ detailed service level agreements for subcontractors
- ◆ well-managed off-the-job training facilities
- ◆ good staff development, regularly reviewed

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ data not collected and used to inform management decisions
- ◆ key skills training and integration not established
- ◆ lack of management monitoring
- ◆ underdeveloped management-information systems
- ◆ over-reliance on one type of assessment method

43. Senior managers at ASSA set annual targets and objectives in line with their departmental budget forecasts. The board of ASSA reviews the targets and objectives, and when agreed on, they form part of the annual business plan. The teams' targets and objectives are given to team managers who are then responsible for ensuring that they are achieved. In turn, team managers meet with individual staff members from the team and agree on the targets and objectives each person will be responsible for. Managers meet with individual staff members to review the progress being made towards their achievement every six months. The results of these meetings are recorded on progress record sheets and kept in the staff member's personal file. The records are referred to at the next six-monthly meeting, which also forms part of the staff member's annual appraisal. This target-setting and review system helps to monitor individual and team progress of agreed objectives and to focus on the importance of individual achievements.

44. ASSA has detailed agreements with its subcontracted training providers. The

agreements specify the level of service required and criteria of what both parties will provide during the lifetime of the agreement. There is regular contact between both parties to review progress and discuss areas of concern. However, the agreement does not include requirements such as subcontractors making available their internal and external verification reports relating to ASSA's trainees.

45. The off-the-job training facilities used by ASSA's trainees are well equipped, clean and reflect best industrial practice in the way they are operated. The facilities are well managed, with professional relationships between trainees, tutors and managers. They also often operate the same working practices and principles as some of the large employers in the area. For example in one training centre manufacturing trainees practising assembly production line work have tea and lunch breaks which are strictly limited and controlled to reflect the workplace practice. Trainees' production performance is closely monitored, with wall charts on display showing individual and team performances, together with how they are improving. The training prepares trainees well for the work they will be required to do in the workplace.

46. Staff at ASSA are developed in line with their job requirements. The annual appraisal system provides an opportunity for staff to meet with their line managers and discuss their performance and progress. At this time development needs are also discussed and recorded. Senior managers check and agree on the development needs and arrangements are made for any necessary development to be carried out. There is a six-monthly review of each staff member's development progress and any courses attended are systematically evaluated to ensure that they are useful.

47. Most meetings within ASSA are minuted and distributed to staff to ensure that all the issues discussed are properly communicated. However, occasional meetings have taken place between managers and the staff, minutes of which have not been recorded or distributed.

48. Although ASSA does have a database system for recording trainees and employers' details, the information stored is limited to TEC claim requirements, and, as a result, managers are not able to use performance data to enable them to make informed decisions about the training and assessment programmes. A new system has recently been purchased but is still not developed sufficiently to provide accurate performance data.

49. There is a lack of monitoring checks carried out by management to ensure that staff carry out their duties fully. For instance, some employers' agreements have not been signed, and health and safety reports requiring employers to take action have not been followed up. The ratio of trainees to staff in some departments is high. Because of additional responsibilities and the large number of trainees, employers and subcontractors involved in training, some managers do not have sufficient time for all their managerial duties.

50. Key skills have not yet been fully taught and assessed for modern apprentices and national trainees. To what extent they are to be integrated with the NVQ work

has yet to be established. At the moment, there are five different pilot schemes being run by ASSA, two involving the major awarding body, one of which is attempting to integrate key skills into the NVQ level 3 scheme and the other attempting to identify key skills from the production line for national trainees. Other schemes involve successful integration into a national traineeship programme, attempting to utilise national certificate core skills and the setting up of intensive key skills courses at Barhaugh Hall.

Quality assurance

Grade 3

51. ASSA does not have a comprehensive formal, recorded quality assurance system. The company does not provide training or assessment directly, but is responsible for the management of the training provided by subcontractors and employers. These organisations have their own quality assurance arrangements. The company is in the process of developing its own quality assurance systems, and has sought the help of consultants. The company collects and produces performance statistics for all its programmes. The subcontractors use trainees' feedback questionnaires. The company has recently introduced a database provided by Sunderland TEC. This is a system for the control of contractual information. Also in operation is the QCM (Quality Cost Management) system, modelled on a system used by a major employer in the automotive industry for the control of subcontractor purchasing. Staff development is also monitored using a computer-based system and progress is displayed in ASSA's main office. Also introduced recently is a further computer package for human-resource control. ASSA intends to use this database for trainees and their own staff records. Induction and satisfaction questionnaires coupled with exit interviews and employers and employees' views are all in the development stage. The self-assessment report is informative and inspectors used the report as the basis from which to seek further evidence that quality assurance procedures were being pursued. In addition, action plans have been formed from the strengths and weaknesses and, in some cases, have been implemented. Some of the strengths cited were considered to be no more than normal practice. Inspectors identified additional strengths and weaknesses and agreed with the self-assessment grade.

GOOD PRACTICE

A bi-monthly 'Story so far' information sheet is produced internally by ASSA and distributed to the Employment Service staff and other New Deal stakeholders. Although presented in a newsletter style and aimed at training issues in New Deal, the publication also covers stories about the region. In an effort to attract trainees and younger people to the readership the 'Story so far' is written in a humorous but informative style. It is also able to provide any interesting news from forum members about job opportunities and planned expansions, often before the general media know about it. The publication acts as an effective communication and marketing tool that keeps the work of ASSA in high profile with New Deal clients, advisors and employers.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ managers promote and are enthusiastic about quality assurance
- ◆ good self-assessment process leads to continuous improvement
- ◆ rapid action in making improvements

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ underdeveloped quality assurance operations
- ◆ trainees and employers' feedback systems not fully implemented
- ◆ ineffective procedures for monitoring the performance of subcontractors

52. Some of the forum's member companies are recognised as world-class production units with excellent quality assurance procedures. The company and its staff are committed to emulating their success. Staff enthusiastically promote quality assurance systems to achieve this aim. There are some new quality assurance systems resulting from the process of self-assessment, for example, to measure quality, cost and management (QCM) and the introduction of departmental work instructions, some of which have been formatted into standard control procedures. It is hoped to use some of these systems for monitoring performance at other forum members and subcontractors if trials within ASSA are successful. The company evaluated its programmes and determined that the present engineering NVQ did not meet industry needs. In conjunction with a major employer, ASSA wrote and is piloting a new NVQ. Accreditation by the lead body is imminent.

GOOD PRACTICE

ASSA's staff working on New Deal programmes complete a feedback form outlining their week and showing problems, statistics of achievement, areas of concern, highlights and general news items. The form must be returned to the manager by the Thursday evening and the information is used to produce an action plan and agenda for the weekly team meeting on the following day. This process ensures that all members of the New Deal team are fully involved in the meetings and helps to prevent problems before they develop and become more serious.

53. All staff were fully involved in the process of self-assessment and have contributed to the content of the report. The TEC organised awareness-raising events which staff attended. Where appropriate, subcontractors and employers contributed to the report. The final report is descriptive, strengths and weaknesses were for the most part accurately identified and an action plan was drawn up to address the weaknesses. Some of the weaknesses had already been addressed by the time of inspection. Self-assessment is a continuous part of the company's quality assurance systems. For example, an initial self-assessment report was drawn up in February 1999 followed by an action plan. Managers recognised that the self-assessment process was highlighting many minor weaknesses which could be addressed immediately or within a short space of time. The weaknesses in the action plan were addressed and a second self-assessment report was produced in July 1999, which was used for the inspection. The experience of producing the report highlighted for the company the fact that, with prompt action, the mechanism and processes used, followed by the implementation of improvements, produce further ideas for improvement, so that the process becomes self-perpetuating.

54. Internal verifiers are clear about their individual responsibilities within their own organisations for monitoring the quality of assessments and recording the verification process. However, there is no formal written procedure to enable employers and subcontractors to provide guidance for internal verifiers on the procedures to follow. Assessment results are not regularly sampled and reviewed, and the quality of training is not monitored across all of the member companies in which trainees are employed. Internal and external verifiers' reports from subcontractors are not regularly reviewed by ASSA.

55. Although the company's systems meet all the requirements of the TEC's quality audit team, some of them have not been fully implemented or fully communicated to all members of staff. There is a lack of effective procedures and consistent monitoring or assessment of the quality of training provided by subcontractors and employers. All training and assessment are carried out by subcontractors and ASSA has formal service level agreements with them, but it is difficult to establish a comparison of their performance. Although regular meetings



do take place and actions required are planned, subcontractors are not required to provide regular written reports and it is unclear whether all subcontractors meet the standards required by ASSA and the TEC contract.

56. Trainees' views are sought using questionnaires when they leave their programmes. Feedback is used to improve training. Further documents are being designed and tested to obtain the views of parents and employers. New Deal operations have led the way in using feedback to improve training, for example, the so-called 'early warning system' which requires managers to complete each week a form highlighting issues of concern and news items. This good practice is not shared across the organisation.