



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT SEPTEMBER 1999

REINSPECTION DECEMBER 2000

Damar Limited

SUMMARY

At inspection in September 1999, Damar Limited provided satisfactory training in management and professional studies, and in business administration. Equal opportunities and management of training were satisfactory, but there was little analysis and use of data to guide management decisions in either area. At inspection, the training in retailing and customer service was unsatisfactory and failed to meet trainees' needs. Portfolios in this occupational area contained inappropriate evidence. The teaching of background knowledge was weak and key skills were poorly integrated into the vocational training. At reinspection, the weaknesses in this occupational area had been addressed to become strengths with good improvements in theory training, assessment and key skills. Trainee support has improved significantly since inspection and is now satisfactory. Trainees are matched to appropriate employment opportunities and benefit from well-planned training. Progress reviews are well documented and monitored for their quality. At inspection, quality assurance arrangements were not applied effectively across all areas of training, and internal verification lacked rigour. At reinspection, inspectors found significant improvements to internal verification and evaluation activities.

As a result of reinspection of Damar Limited, the original published report text for retailing and customer service, trainee support and quality assurance has been replaced by new text which makes reference to the original inspection findings.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
Management & professional	3
Business administration	3
Retailing & customer service	4

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

REINSPECTION	GRADE
Retailing & customer service	2

REINSPECTION	GRADE
Trainee support	3
Quality assurance	3

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ good resources in training centre
- ◆ effective short-term action-planning
- ◆ prompt and effective response to complaints
- ◆ effective system for staff development
- ◆ good matching of trainees to appropriate employment opportunities



- ◆ effective monitoring of trainers to improve performance
- ◆ trainees access additional, vocationally relevant courses
- ◆ good use of trainees' prior learning

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient involvement by some employers
- ◆ insufficient teaching of theory
- ◆ slow integration of key skills for some trainees
- ◆ trainees' narrow understanding of NVQ and assessment methods
- ◆ insufficient analysis of achievement and retention data
- ◆ ineffective use of initial assessment tests
- ◆ incomplete quality assurance arrangements

INTRODUCTION

1. Damar Limited (Damar) was established in 1980 by the present managing director. Three shareholders each hold one-third of the shares. One shareholder is the managing director and one of the other shareholders is the company secretary. The company is situated in Stockport's town centre, adjacent to a major retail complex. The company originally offered training to fee-paying individuals and companies. In 1981, contracts were also obtained to provide government-funded training through the then Manpower Services Commission. This training is now funded through Manchester Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) and Stockport and High Peak TEC. Manchester TEC acted as the lead TEC for the purpose of this inspection. In the summer of 1998, Manchester TEC invited Damar to take over the training of approximately 50 trainees from another training provider. In the autumn of 1998, Manchester TEC invited Damar to take over responsibility for a further 150 trainees, who had previously been training with another organisation whose contract was not to be renewed. To support these trainees and provide off-the-job training, Damar opened premises in the centre of Manchester. Funding to equip the premises was provided by Manchester TEC, and the training facility was designated by the TEC as one of the 'Centres of Excellence' in the Manchester area. The new centre was officially opened in May 1999. However, since the inspection in September 1999, Damar withdrew from the 'Centre of Excellence' and officially ceased involvement in December 1999. This effectively halved the numbers of funded trainees under contract to both TECs. All the staff associated with the 'Centre of Excellence' transferred to a new organisation which took over the project.

2. Operationally, Damar is divided into three sections. Each section has its own manager, who reports to the managing director. Damar Business College offers trainees and New Deal clients training leading to national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 2 and 3 in insurance, supervisory management, accounting, business administration, information technology, and customer service. There are currently no New Deal clients. Trainees are on foundation modern apprenticeships, advanced modern apprenticeships and other youth training programmes. The numbers of trainees of each type in each vocational area are shown in table 1 below. Trainee numbers have reduced from 311 in September 1999 to 134 in December 2000.

3. Damar Personnel Solutions offers a commercial recruitment service to companies in Stockport and Manchester, the latter taking particular responsibility for finding jobs and placements for the company's work-based trainees. Damar Training Solutions offers a wide range of training courses to companies and private individuals in the area. Courses cover information technology, sales, management, and business skills. Clients include several nationally recognised companies and organisations.

4. Manchester has a population of just over one million, of whom 631,000 are of working age, and just under 500,000 are employed. There has been a shift from traditional heavy industries to service industries. The city is a regional centre for banking, insurance, retailing, computing and financial services. Manchester International Airport is nearby, and the Trafford Centre retail park opened last year, attracting over half a million people per week to the area. The regeneration of Salford docks as the Salford Quays commercial centre has recently been completed. Unemployment rates vary considerably across the area. Over 25 per cent of young people are employed in clerical or secretarial occupations. Stockport forms part of Greater Manchester, with a large number of people commuting into the city centre. Stockport itself has a significant financial sector. The manufacturing sector still employs large numbers of people, with fabricated metal products, publishing and printing being particularly well represented.

5. In August 1998, unemployment stood at nearly 11 per cent in the Manchester local authority area. In Greater Manchester, it was 6 per cent, and in Stockport 4.3 per cent, compared with 5.5 per cent in the Northwest region and 5.2 per cent nationally. In June 2000, unemployment stood at 5.4 per cent in the Northwest region. In Manchester, minority ethnic groups make up 4.6 per cent of the population. Long-term unemployment is higher within these communities than in the population as a whole. In Stockport, the minority ethnic groups account for less than 1 per cent of the population. The statistics for minority ethnic groups have not changed substantially since inspection in September 1999 to reinspection in December 2000.

6. In the Stockport area, the proportion of school leavers who achieved five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C or above was 50.2 per cent in 1998. The national average was 46.3 per cent. In 1999, similar statistics for Stockport were 50.1 per cent and 47.9 per cent nationally.

Table 1 – numbers of trainees at reinspection

	ADVANCED MODERN APPRENTICES	FOUNDATION MODERN APPRENTICES	OTHER YOUTH TRAINEES	TOTAL
Accounting	6	11	2	19
Business administration	39	49	0	88
Customer service	2	1	0	3
Information technology	7	1	0	8
Insurance	6	9	0	15
Supervisory management	0	0	1	1
Total	60	71	3	134

INSPECTION FINDINGS

7. Damar produced its first self-assessment report in February 1998. The report was produced following two days of training, attended by the managing director and the contracts manager. The self-assessment report was revised following further training provided by Manchester TEC. Internal training events were held at Damar, and opinion sought from all staff. Managers collated opinions, and the draft self-assessment report was circulated to all staff. The company produced its second self-assessment report in August 2000. Staff were invited to comment on the strengths and weaknesses identified and a draft report was developed which took into account their views and feedback from trainees and employers.

8. A team of five inspectors spent a total of 20 days at Damar during September 1999. All aspects of training were inspected, including reviews and assessments. Inspectors examined a range of documents, including trainees' records, trainees' portfolios, contract information, awarding-body reports and company policies. They also interviewed 49 trainees, 20 employers and 12 of Damar's staff.

9. At reinspection in December 2000, a team of three inspectors spent a total of nine days at Damar. Inspectors examined 25 trainees' administration files, 13 portfolios of evidence and a range of awarding body reports and internal paperwork. Seven employers were visited and six workplace supervisors interviewed. Inspectors interviewed 21 trainees and 13 of Damar's staff. Two reviews were observed and judged to be satisfactory and good. One assessment was observed and judged to be satisfactory. Two training sessions were observed in information technology and customer service. Both were judged to be good.

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Management & professional

Grade 3

10. Damar has two youth trainees pursuing an NVQ in supervisory management at level 3. There are also 11 modern apprentices following route two of the modern apprenticeship framework in insurance. This involves working towards three units of a level 3 NVQ in insurance plus a foundation certificate from the insurance industry's professional awarding body, together with an NVQ in customer service and key skills qualifications. The youth trainees are placed in small and medium-sized companies. The modern apprentices work in a variety of departments in insurance brokerages, insurance companies and solicitors' offices dealing with insurance-claim issues. Approximately 25 per cent of the trainees receive their training in the workplace. The remaining 75 per cent attend Damar for off-the-job training on a fortnightly basis. All trainees are assessed at work. Trainees are

visited in the workplace at least every four weeks, and some as frequently as every week. Their progress is reviewed formally every 13 weeks. The training programme for the foundation certificate in insurance follows the examination syllabus, and mainly uses teaching resources published by the professional awarding body. The off-the-job training takes place in excellently refurbished, well-resourced premises in the centre of Stockport. The company introduced the insurance programme at the end of 1997, and no candidates have yet completed it. Inspectors agreed with only one of the 15 strengths and one of the weaknesses identified in Damar's self-assessment report. Additional strengths and weaknesses were identified, and inspectors awarded a lower grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ excellent working relationships between trainees and trainers
- ◆ extensive preparation for professional examinations in insurance
- ◆ effective short-term action-planning for trainees

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ trainees' lack of involvement in planning their training programme
- ◆ poor co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training
- ◆ insufficient integration of key skills with NVQ training

11. Staff demonstrate a very caring, positive attitude towards trainees. The trainer/assessors provide trainees with contact numbers and make themselves available to trainees outside formal training and reviews. Those trainees who need it are visited weekly. The trainer/assessors help them with technical issues arising from their work, as well as supporting them in their training. Many trainees also seek the trainer/assessors' advice on personal problems. These excellent working relationships provide a good basis for the learning process and make an important contribution to trainees' positive experience of their training programme. Trainees in insurance are given good tuition towards their examinations for the professional foundation certificate. They are further well supported by good revision planning. Preparation for the examinations contributes to the knowledge and understanding required for the units of the insurance NVQ, but is also tailored to support the trainees' work towards the customer service NVQ. There is good recording of tasks completed by trainees. Future actions are planned and clearly agreed on for the next review. The completion of agreed actions is monitored effectively. Trainees are very clear about their progress on these short-term action plans. Trainees welcome this close contact with the trainer/assessors, the benefits of which are reflected in their portfolios.

12. Although short-term action-planning is good, the trainer/assessors take the lead role in formulating the plans. Trainees are not encouraged to take an active role in this planning. There is also a lack of medium- and long-term target-setting with

interim milestones, and trainees are not set challenging goals. No reference is made to target dates agreed on the training plan at the start of the programme. The training plan is not updated as trainees progress. Most trainees do not meet the target dates set for completion of NVQ units.

13. Employers and the trainer/assessors do not work together to maximise learning and training opportunities for trainees. The training which takes place in the workplace is provided by employers and is meant to support trainees in their work towards their NVQs. In practice, however, it often lacks structure. Most employers are unfamiliar with the content and structure of the NVQ, are not involved in NVQ assessment and do not understand the modern apprenticeship framework. Trainees have many learning opportunities during the course of their work, but these are not being recorded, and the skills and knowledge they develop through this on-the-job learning are not being fully assessed. There is little co-ordination of on-the-job learning and off-the-job training; the two take place independently. On-the-job training is not planned to complement tasks set for the NVQ, nor are tasks set for the NVQ modified to take account of any training carried out by the employer. There is too much emphasis on evidence-gathering and assessment and not enough emphasis on training.

14. Until recently, training in key skills was not given until after the NVQ was completed. For new trainees, key skills training is now being integrated with the NVQ programme. Most trainees have little awareness of the key skills requirements of their programme, and the supporting knowledge for key skills is still not being systematically provided as the NVQ course progresses.

Business administration

Grade 3

15. There are 277 trainees in this occupational area, training for NVQs at levels 2 and 3 in accounting, business administration, and information technology. The following table lists the total number of trainees in each subject area, with a breakdown by type of training programme. Note that the contract for the current year does not provide for any new trainees to start other than those who are modern apprentices or national trainees.

Table 2 – numbers of trainees

	Modern apprentices	National trainees	Other youth trainees	Total
Accounting	7	10	8	25
Business administration	105	52	84	241
Information technology	4	3	4	11
Total	116	65	96	277

16. Damar helps those trainees who do not already have jobs to find employment or a suitable work placement. Employers and work-placement providers range from multinational insurance companies, through large financial establishments, to accountancy and legal practices, and a large number of small and medium-sized commercial and industrial businesses. A variety of short courses are offered to trainees, in addition to the NVQs. These include introductions to the NVQ and key skills, and to book-keeping and the professional body that represents accounting technicians, and courses on application of number, telephone techniques, and a range of computer software packages and applications. Courses are given at both the Stockport and Manchester training centres. The trainer/assessor visits trainees in their workplace at least monthly, except when trainees visit the training centre regularly. In this case, meetings with the trainer/assessor are conducted during the visits to the centre. The trainer/assessors are also involved in the commercially funded training. Of leavers in 1997-98, 58 per cent achieved an NVQ; 42 per cent of trainees left before completing their training and development plan. Inspectors agreed with only one of the 16 strengths identified in the self-assessment report. They identified additional strengths and weaknesses, and awarded a lower grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ appropriate work placements
- ◆ effective short-term action-planning
- ◆ well-supported portfolio-building
- ◆ employers' satisfaction with quality of initial training
- ◆ excellent information technology resources in training centres

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ trainees' poor understanding of qualifications
- ◆ lack of support for, and involvement in training by employers

- ◆ narrow range of evidence in NVQ level 3 portfolios
- ◆ insufficient integration of key skills with NVQ training
- ◆ lack of opportunities for trainees to gain background knowledge in business administration

17. Before trainees start with an employer, an analysis of their job role is undertaken. The job content is compared with the requirements of the NVQ to check that evidence for all units of the qualification can be collected. Trainees and assessors have regular one-to-one sessions, where realistic action points are discussed, agreed on and recorded. At the start of the next session, the previous action points are discussed, and any required remedial action is identified and recorded. Trainees welcome this advice and the support they receive on how to build their portfolios and cross-reference evidence. Trainees are able to identify and explain the various types of evidence they could gather, and how evidence demonstrates their competence in different situations. This introduction to portfolio-building is particularly valuable for trainees recruited directly from school. Employers value the initial training that Damar gives the young people attending its business administration courses. They are impressed with the trainees' preparedness and awareness of the interview process, and with the sound grasp of basic office skills which Damar's initial training has given them. A number of firms have used Damar for recruiting their young employees for many years. The resources available in the two training centres for trainees who attend on a day-release basis are fully appropriate for the level of skill required. The software available is up to date, and complements that available to trainees in the workplace.

18. Trainees' understanding of their qualification is poor. Many are unable to say whether they are on a modern apprenticeship, a national traineeship, or some other type of youth training programme. Employers have little involvement in the training. Some employers do not give their trainees sufficient time for training. Some business administration trainees are not allowed to attend off-the-job training sessions, or they feel that they are too busy to attend. Some employers do not provide the opportunities for trainees to gather evidence which does not occur within their current job role, even though Damar's initial analysis of the job identified the need for such opportunities, and the employer originally promised to provide them. Trainees' progress is slow. Portfolios for level 3 NVQs contain only a narrow range and variety of evidence. Many portfolios lack witness statements or observations by assessors in the workplace. Key skills are mentioned at an early stage in trainees' programmes, but trainees do not start to collect evidence for key skills until they begin their level 3 NVQ. Opportunities for gathering evidence are missed. Trainees perceive key skills as an additional qualification to be gained, and not as an integral part of their vocational qualification. Most of the activity during day-release sessions focuses on portfolio-building rather than learning new skills or gaining background knowledge. Day-release attendance at the training centres is not mandatory. There is a lack of opportunity for trainees to gain underpinning knowledge, and to understand how to operate in different situations.

A range of short training courses is available for trainees, including training in key skills. Attendance is optional. Training is not sufficiently planned and structured to ensure that all training needs are met. Background knowledge is checked through the use of written questions. The type of language used and the way that the questions are posed make them hard for trainees to understand. Many trainees' answers are vague. Trainees find the difficulty of understanding and answering the questions disheartening.

Retailing & customer service

Grade 2

19. There are three trainees pursuing NVQs in customer service. Two are advanced modern apprentices working towards a level 3 qualification and one trainee is a foundation modern apprentice working towards level 2. All three trainees are employed, two are working in car dealerships and one is working in a small office. Trainees, who found their employment through Damar, attend a week-long induction at the Damar training centre. Trainees who are already employed when they are recruited onto their programmes have a one-to-one induction in the workplace with their trainer/assessor. Trainees are invited to attend day-release, once a fortnight at the Damar training centre. During these sessions, trainees receive one-to-one support from their trainer/assessor in portfolio-building. A two-day customer service course has recently been introduced to the programme as well as a series of key skills support workshops. Trainees are also invited to attend additional, commercially focused training in a range of business skills, including telephone techniques, information technology, communication and presentation skills. Trainees who attend day-release are visited every eight weeks in their workplace by their trainer/assessors to carry out workplace observations and assessment. Trainees who do not attend the day release are visited more frequently, usually every four weeks. The trainer/assessor carries out reviews in the workplace every eight weeks. Since the first inspection, the number of trainees has fallen. In the last twelve months, 43 per cent achieved their full qualification including key skills, 21 per cent achieved their NVQ, and 14 per cent left without achieving a qualification. The remaining 22 per cent are still in training.

At the first inspection, the main weaknesses identified were:

- ◆ failure to match trainees to appropriate NVQ
- ◆ trainees' lack of understanding of key skills
- ◆ insufficient off-the-job training
- ◆ narrow range and inappropriate level of evidence in portfolios
- ◆ little involvement by employers in training

20. Following inspection, Damar produced an action plan, employed new members of staff and took measures to improve the quality of its training and assessment. Trainees are now in the right jobs to ensure they get good and relevant evidence for their NVQs. The company has addressed all but one of its original weaknesses and turned one of them into a strength.

21. The new self-assessment report cited two strengths and one weakness. The company awarded this area a grade 3. Inspectors agreed with the strengths and weaknesses given, identified an additional strength and awarded a higher grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ excellent one-to-one coaching
- ◆ innovative use of reviews
- ◆ trainees access to additional, vocationally relevant courses

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient feedback on assessment to trainees
- ◆ some unsupportive employers

22. Trainees now receive excellent one-to-one coaching by the trainer/assessor, both in the workplace and when they attend their day-release at the training centre. The trainer/assessor has a wide range of customer service experience as well as excellent information technology knowledge and skills. During these coaching sessions, the trainer/assessor develops a very good rapport with the trainees. Trainees are coached in customer service techniques and this is linked to teaching them new and relevant information technology skills by means of a portable laptop computer. Following this coaching, trainees are able to do their jobs more efficiently and some trainees have been able to introduce new ideas and systems to their companies as a result. These trainees can provide evidence for their NVQ and key skills. Trainees have a clear understanding of the relevance and benefit of their key skills. The trainer/assessor carries out many observations of trainees in the workplace. Portfolios demonstrate a range of witness statements and recorded observations by other staff from the workplace and the training centre.

23. A comprehensive and in-depth progress review has been introduced. It takes place every eight weeks between the trainer/assessor, the trainee and the workplace supervisor. This review has positive benefits for both the trainees and employers. During reviews, trainees are encouraged to assess their performance since the last review and to discuss any ideas for improvements that they have introduced as a result of what they have learnt during their NVQ programme. Trainees are enthusiastic and clear about the benefit of these reviews and employers are delighted at the impact of the training on their employees'

development. Trainees have been sufficiently motivated to suggest changes to operating procedures to increase the level of customer service for the whole company and employers confirm the positive business benefits. Employers are also encouraged, during the review, to identify further Damar training courses which may benefit their employees and business. Most employers are enthusiastic about this new level of involvement and are taking more interest in their trainee's progress with their NVQ qualifications. Trainees are encouraged to use the review as evidence for some of their key skills.

24. Damar has very well-equipped training premises in the centre of Stockport where it runs a series of courses for its commercial clients. These courses include telephone techniques, a variety of business skills and a range of industry-standard business software applications. More NVQ trainees are now attending these courses and benefit from mixing with a mature group of delegates with a wide range of business experience. Employers are now starting to see the benefit of these courses and feel that they are an additional bonus for their trainees. The schedule of NVQ and key skills training sessions has recently been expanded and all the trainees have attended one or more of these courses. A new, two-day customer service course covers all aspects of the NVQ, as well as encouraging trainees to self-assess their levels of customer service. Trainees are awarded certificates when they have attended these courses and use these as evidence in their portfolios. Trainees enjoy attending these courses and benefit from training which is specifically tailored to their own job roles.

25. Although trainees understand how their portfolios are internally verified, they are unclear when formal assessment takes place and how a unit of the NVQ is finally achieved. Trainees are unsure about the different range and methods of assessment which are used. The trainer/assessor gives some verbal feedback when portfolio evidence is checked, but trainees are not given specific feedback about their own performance or product evidence and how it relates to the standards. Trainees do not get any written feedback at the end of an assessment that confirms their success in achieving a unit. Nor do they get any written feedback about work or performance that has not reached the required standard. If work is corrected by their trainer/assessor, trainees complete it again and only the final piece of work goes into the portfolio. Trainees still feel that product evidence is important and do not understand how observations by their assessor can reduce the size of their portfolios. Trainees know that units are completed only when they are signed off by their trainer/assessor, but are often not sure how and when this stage is reached.

26. Some employers are still reluctant to release their trainees to attend the day release in the training centre and the additional courses that are on offer. This has resulted in some trainees making slower progress because they are not given any time at work to gather their evidence or to prepare for their work-based assessments. This problem is being addressed, and new employers now sign an agreement that states that trainees will be given time off for training.

27. Internal verification practices are satisfactory. The internal verification policy clearly details Damar's sampling strategy. Assessment and internal verification is

explained clearly to trainees at their induction and all have a copy of the process at the front of their portfolios. Assessors are regularly observed carrying out assessment by the internal verifier and are given appropriate written feedback.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 3

28. Damar has experience of providing training programmes for people with a wide range of backgrounds and abilities. An equal opportunities policy has been in operation since 1988. This policy has been recently reviewed and updated. The policy lays down the specific responsibilities of managers, staff and trainees. It also names the managing director as the person to whom any discriminatory behaviour should be reported. The policy meets the contractual requirements of both TECs and awarding body. The equal opportunities policy is included in the induction pack for new staff, and job descriptions specify that staff must comply with the company's policies. Trainees are issued with a copy of the policy statement in their induction pack. Damar's recruitment and selection policy for employing staff also embodies the principles of equal opportunities. There is an appeals procedure, in line with awarding-body requirements, so that trainees can challenge any unfairness during assessment. The self-assessment report correctly identified most of the weaknesses in this aspect of Damar's work. Inspectors regarded many of the strengths identified in the self-assessment report as no more than normal practice, but identified additional strengths. Inspectors awarded the same grade as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ prompt intervention and investigation of complaints
- ◆ code of conduct drawn up by trainees and staff
- ◆ changes implemented to attract more men

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient analysis of equal opportunities data
- ◆ insufficient targeting of under-represented groups

29. Damar's managers are aware of the issues surrounding sexual and racial harassment, and have responded promptly when any incidents have occurred. Firm measures have been taken to ensure that such behaviour does not continue. When the new training centre was set up in Manchester, Damar's staff worked with trainees to develop a code of conduct. This code is now included in the induction pack for trainees. It includes guidance on showing respect for others. Staff and trainees work together to create a civilised atmosphere in the training centres in which discriminatory behaviour would be out of place. The managing director

takes personal responsibility for investigating all complaints, recording the actions taken, and writing personally to the complainant. Complaints are individually reviewed at managers' meetings. The company has a strong 'customer focus', and sees complaints as an opportunity to demonstrate this.

30. The company has its origins in secretarial training, and has consciously made changes to move away from the traditional gender stereotypes associated with this occupational area. The corporate image has been completely revamped, including redecorating the premises, in an attempt to create an environment which is more attractive to men. Local vacancies for men and women, giving details of the job role and the training Damar can offer, are now displayed in the office's window in a further effort to attract more men. The intention of increasing the participation of men has been achieved: 30 per cent of trainees are men. The ethnic mix of trainees does not fully represent the very wide range of Manchester's population, however, which contains significant communities of Afro-Caribbean, Chinese, and Eastern European origin as well as many groups from the Indian subcontinent. This low representation among trainees is in part because much of Damar's work is carried out in Stockport, where minority ethnic groups account for less than 1 per cent of the population. In addition, most of the current trainees in the Manchester site have been transferred from other training providers, so Damar has so far had no influence on their recruitment or selection.

31. The training centres in Manchester and Stockport have access to all floors by lift, but are not fully accessible to wheelchair users.

32. Damar collects basic data on gender, ethnicity and disability, in line with TEC requirements. However, the data are not analysed with a view to using them to guide implementation of the equal opportunities policy. Data on equality of opportunity are not fully integrated into the computerised management-information systems, making the data difficult to use. The company is aware of this shortcoming, and is seeking to improve the availability of this data. Much work has been completed, but there has not yet been time for this to have any impact on the training programmes. The company has not yet developed a framework which would enable it to monitor equal opportunities in a more sophisticated way. Damar does not track trainees from application to leaving. The company does not collect data which would enable it to identify if one particular type of trainee is dropping out more than another, or achieves more slowly.

33. Although Damar has sought to attract more men, it has not yet targeted minority ethnic communities. Marketing materials do not mention the company's commitment to equal opportunities. Staff have not been trained in equal opportunities, and existing trainees have a low level of awareness of equal opportunities. Workplace supervisors and employers are not aware of Damar's stance on equality of opportunity, and do not recall seeing the company's policy.

Trainee support

Grade 3

34. Trainees are recruited through two main routes: as school leavers or as young employees. The school leavers attend an interview at Damar at which career preferences, performance at school and work experience are discussed. Applicants take a basic skills test and if a satisfactory level is reached, a profile of the prospective trainee is prepared and circulated to employers, who then interview applicants in the workplace. Trainees who are already working for a company are visited in the workplace and interviewed. Here the main focus is a job analysis, which identifies whether the job role will provide suitable opportunities for attaining the relevant NVQ. Trainees recruited as school leavers take part in a one-week induction programme which includes work preparation activities. Key skills are also assessed at this stage. The programme may be extended by a further week, if the trainee requires basic IT training, before taking up employment. Trainees who are already employed when recruited, have, until recently, received a one-to-one induction in the workplace, lasting less than half a day. Employed trainees are now offered a one-day induction at Damar's training centre. Key skills assessment takes place at the start of the programme. Trainees are allocated to a trainer/assessor, who meets them at least once every month. Formal reviews are conducted every eight weeks. The employer or workplace supervisor is involved in the review.

At the first inspection the main weaknesses identified were:

- ◆ no initial assessment of key skills
- ◆ unrealistic training plans
- ◆ no records of personal counselling or advice
- ◆ infrequent and inadequate progress reviews
- ◆ inadequate induction for trainees recruited from employers

35. At reinspection, inspectors found that all the weaknesses had been addressed in varying degrees. Key skills initial assessment now takes place, but the use of the test results is still unclear. Training plans are updated as circumstances change. Advice and counselling are now recorded. The review process has received considerable attention, resulting in effective reviews. Induction for trainees who are already in employment has been improved and is now satisfactory.

36. Self-assessment identified strengths in the quality of advice and the level of support for trainees. These were confirmed and are recognised in the strengths given below. Other strengths in the areas of induction and celebration of achievement are considered to be no more than normal practice. The one weakness, concerning limited uptake of additional examination options, was not felt to have sufficient impact to be a weakness. Additional weaknesses were found during inspection. Inspectors agreed with the grade given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good matching of trainees to appropriate employment opportunities
- ◆ effective pastoral support
- ◆ good use of accreditation of prior learning

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ ineffective use of initial assessment tests
- ◆ limited basic skills support available
- ◆ no unit certification for early leavers

37. Eighty-two per cent of trainees come to Damar directly from school. They receive excellent guidance and support from a specialist recruitment team at Damar which has a good knowledge of the local job market and an extensive network of contacts among companies in the Stockport and Manchester areas. Close contact is maintained with prospective trainees during the job-search period. All opportunities for job interviews are rigorously pursued. Damar collects interview feedback from employers and passes this to unsuccessful applicants in a supportive way, using the feedback to improve future interview performance. Through the summer recruitment period there are weekly drop-in sessions where trainees can polish curricula vitae and interview skills and discuss vacancies. The whole process is well planned and leads to trainees finding highly suitable employment, both in terms of career aspirations and relevance to their chosen NVQ. Employers also find this a useful service and often rely on Damar to help them fill their posts for trainees.

38. Trainees receive a high level of support, which enables them to overcome barriers to achievement. Personal problems are handled with sensitivity and staff devote extra time and effort to trainees who have difficulties. Damar's staff are also very active in tackling barriers that can arise when employers are unsupportive. One trainee booked a holiday to attend off-the-job training because his employer would not allow him time off. Damar intervened and this was remedied. Another trainee had such a high workload that he could not find time to attend training. Damar pursued this matter tenaciously until the trainee was allowed a half-day per week to work on his NVQ portfolio. Damar's staff are also rigorous in encouraging workplace supervisors to take part in review meetings. Damar is successfully motivating employers to become more involved in the NVQ and give more support to trainees. This is reflected in a steady rise in trainees' attendance at both day-release and one-day training events. Over 65 per cent of trainees' now attend courses compared with fewer than 25 per cent at the time of inspection.

39. Damar has an effective procedure for enabling trainees to take advantage of accreditation of prior learning. Seventeen per cent of current trainees are making use of this provision, which is unusual for a provider with such a young group of trainees. The process is documented using the individual training plan and an

accreditation of prior learning claim form. All trainees have been asked to supply evidence of their GCSE grades, with a view to determining who can claim accreditation under the new key skills assessment arrangements. Two staff already hold the accreditation of prior learning qualification and all of the training team are working towards it.

40. Damar gives particular attention to the collection of qualitative data for initial assessment. References are obtained from schools, the initial interview includes assessment of previous experience and personal qualities and, once the trainee has started, a job analysis identifies training needs. Staff are confident in using this 'soft' information, but are less clear about the purpose and interpretation of the initial assessment tests that they administer. Two kinds of test are currently in use: one for basic skills and one for key skills. Neither test is used consistently. Trainees taking part in the one-week induction take the key skills test during that week, while trainees who are already employed are given the test to take away and complete at home. The basic skills test is only used with trainees entering as school leavers. The results of the basic skills tests and their use are not explained to trainees. Test results and any subsequent arrangements for providing additional support are not consistently recorded. This lack of coherence in using the test results has contributed to problems for a small number of trainees where basic skills needs were not addressed promptly or sufficiently.

41. A very small percentage of the trainees recruited by Damar have poor grades in GCSE English and mathematics. These trainees usually have lower scores in the basic skills test. Some score 50 per cent or lower on the spelling section of the test. Spelling is a particular issue, as most of the trainees are working towards NVQs in administration, where accurate spelling is a requirement. Damar has recognised that some trainees need additional support and have produced self-study booklets for mathematics and English. However, the booklets are not effective, are inappropriate for self-study and have little occupational relevance. The lack of suitable training resources to support basic skills learning is linked to the lack of planning of appropriate basic skills learning sessions. However, monthly workshops are planned and recorded to start at the beginning of 2001.

42. In 1999-2000, 37 per cent of business administration trainees left early without qualifications. This rate has been reduced steadily since April 2000. However, Damar makes no arrangements for the certification of individual units of NVQs for early leavers. The skills, knowledge and experience of trainees who leave early are therefore unrecorded for their future employment opportunities.

Management of training

Grade 3

43. Damar's activities have expanded significantly in the last year. It has taken over the contracts of two training providers which no longer hold contracts from Manchester TEC. In collaboration with Manchester TEC, the company has developed and opened a 'Centre of Excellence' in the heart of Manchester's city

centre. The company has a clear organisational structure, with four departments: Damar Personnel Solutions, Damar Training Solutions, Damar Business College/Centre of Excellence, and Damar Customer Support Services. A new management structure with clearly defined management responsibilities has been introduced to deal with the company's growth strategy. The managing director has overall responsibility for strategic management of the company and is supported in this role by three other members of the senior management team and the manager of the Manchester training centre. These four people have responsibility for the day-to-day running of the company. The training and assessment within the scope of this inspection are provided by 10 trainer/assessors. There are also five training support/administrative staff, and eight staff in recruitment and sales. The training covered by this inspection is well resourced. Most of the staff hold teaching and/or training qualifications. All staff have job descriptions. The company first achieved the Investors in People award in 1995 and re-accredited in 1998. Damar has well-established working relationships with a wide range of local employers. Inspectors agreed with some of the strengths and all of the weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. Inspectors regarded other strengths identified in the self-assessment report as no more than normal practice. They awarded a lower grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good planning for organisational change
- ◆ effective systems for staff development
- ◆ effective communication

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ underdeveloped systems to review and control training
- ◆ insufficient use of data to inform management decisions

44. Damar bases its business plan and organisational targets on policies and strategies which are supported and understood by staff. Working relationships within the company are co-operative and effective. Damar has well-developed processes for business planning, including the development of the company's training plan. These processes have dealt effectively with the significant growth the company has experienced over the last three years. The company devised an effective plan for developing its Manchester 'Centre of Excellence', which was opened in May 1999. It took responsibility for 200 trainees from two training providers which had had their contracts withdrawn by Manchester TEC. Damar managed the assimilation of these trainees well, and 70 per cent of them remain in training. The addition of these trainees represented a trebling in the numbers of Damar's government-funded trainees. During this period of rapid change, long-standing trainer/assessors left the company, and new people were recruited. Damar managed this process well.

45. Damar has good staff appraisal and development programmes, which are linked to the company's training plan. The results of the review process are used as the basis for the staff development programme, which is designed to increase the professional competence of staff, and to help trainers to improve the quality of training. Many staff are registered for the key skills practitioner qualification. New trainer/assessors are given additional support during the early stages of their employment, including a one-month induction programme. Damar takes comprehensive steps to ensure effective communication. It publishes a regular newsletter, and provides clear and thorough information on the various training courses available. In addition to frequent informal meetings between staff, there are also regular and frequent formal staff meetings, the minutes of which are duly recorded and circulated to staff. Time is set aside for staff to meet in order to share information and best practice. This enables staff to support and encourage one another, and helps to promote a consistent approach to training and assessment across the organisation.

46. Managers have developed and implemented management systems to review and control training effectively, including a good system for reviewing trainees' progress in large companies. However, most of the systems are underdeveloped, and there is insufficient analysis of the information produced. Problems go undetected for a long time, and no speedy action is taken to put them right.

47. The company has invested large sums of money in computer equipment over the past two years, and good progress is being made towards implementing new computerised information systems to support decision-making processes. Many reports have recently been produced using these new systems, and these are now providing management with accurate and relevant data. The reports are targeting the critical areas of training. However, actions based on these reports have not yet been implemented.

Quality assurance

Grade 3

48. Damar has a written quality assurance strategy, policy and operational flowchart which include operational activities from recruitment, training, assessment, certification through to evaluation. Work instructions exist for most operational activities. The managing director takes overall responsibility for quality assurance. The company achieved the ISO 9001-quality standard in 1992, and meets the requirements of the awarding bodies through external verification.

At the first inspection the main weaknesses identified were:

- ◆ failure to ensure that training is of a consistently high quality
- ◆ insufficient monitoring of effectiveness of training
- ◆ insufficient monitoring and use of data to improve training
- ◆ failure of internal verification to identify weaknesses in assessment process

49. Significant improvements have been made to monitor the effectiveness and quality of training through increased use of data and observation of trainers. However, there is still insufficient use of data relating to trainee achievement of individual training plans and retention rates. Internal verification activities have improved with standardised paperwork and systematic monitoring.

50. The self-assessment report identified two strengths and two weaknesses. Inspectors broadly agreed with the strengths and found an additional strength relating to the monitoring of trainers' performance. Inspectors found other weaknesses than those proposed by Damar. They awarded the same grade as that proposed in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effective monitoring of trainers to improve performance
- ◆ good use of feedback to develop continuous improvement
- ◆ all staff trained in computerised quality assurance system

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ insufficient monitoring of achievement and retention data
- ◆ some gaps in key training policies and procedures
- ◆ incomplete internal audit schedule

51. Using performance data, one-to-one meetings and observation methods, the training manager is able to monitor effectively the performance of each trainer. The frequency and timeliness of progress reviews with trainees have improved significantly since September 1999. Through observation methods, the training manager has assured the consistency and depth of trainees' progress reviews, ensuring that employers are fully involved in the process. At monthly one-to-one meetings, the training manager discusses performance data with each trainer relating to the time taken for trainees to achieve their qualification, the frequency of reviews, trainees' attendance for day-release and commercial courses and overall achievement rates. The percentage of trainees attending short commercial courses at Damar has increased from 10 per cent in September 1999 to 35 per cent in August 2000 and to over 65 per cent at reinspection. Over 80 per cent of trainees have attended NVQ and/or key skills training sessions since April 2000.

52. Since May 2000, all trainers have attended in-house courses to improve their training skills. The training manager carried out a series of classroom observations and gave immediate feedback to each trainer. A subsequent training session occurred to discuss underlying weaknesses in classroom teaching techniques.

Trainers were again observed in the classroom and individual feedback given by the training manager. Trainees benefit from the enhanced training skills of their trainer.

53. Quality is assured through a variety of feedback methods. Data are collected regularly through a variety of questionnaires. Damar has used these questionnaires to focus on certain aspects of its business. For example, at inspection, a weakness arose regarding induction for employed trainees. Damar immediately sought feedback from employed trainees and developed a new induction procedure to improve the trainees' experience. The training manager seeks less direct feedback from trainer/assessors in monthly one-to-one meetings, as well as by speaking personally to a sample of around 10 per cent of trainees on a regular basis. Also, employers receive systematic telephone calls from Damar to obtain feedback on their satisfaction with the service given. Many changes have been made to the training offered by Damar in response to feedback from staff, trainees and employers. For example, in response to employer and trainee needs, commercial short courses in a range of skills are now promoted more effectively to government-funded trainees at no extra financial cost to the employer.

54. All staff are trained to use and understand Damar's computerised quality assurance system. Damar's clear policy statement on quality assurance is supported by a number of procedures, flow diagrams and working instructions. There are separate procedures for trainees' induction, the design of training programmes and internal verification. The documents plainly set out roles and responsibilities, what should be included, the forms to be used, and who else is to be involved. The company is in the process of reviewing and reissuing new policies and procedures as part of its continuous improvement programme.

55. There are some omissions in key training policies and procedures. The computerised system is incomplete and there are omissions in clear working instructions for areas such as initial assessment, assessment practices and exit interviews. The system does not yet contain all the core procedures relating to trainees, from referral through to exit and follow-up. In some cases, new working practices are being developed at a faster rate than the policies and procedures to support them. There are some inconsistencies in training and assessment practices. For example, some trainees are not encouraged to develop good portfolio building skills at an early stage in their training. For other trainees, key skills are not clearly indexed or referenced to naturally occurring workplace evidence. Some trainees are unclear about the range of assessment methods and find it difficult to differentiate between assessment and training. These inconsistencies are often a result of the different operating practices of individual trainers.

56. The internal audit schedule is incomplete. Some inconsistencies and inaccuracies in staff's working practices and trainee-related paperwork are not systematically identified. Some quality control paperwork is clearly marked with version numbers and dates; some working instructions are not.

57. There is insufficient use of data to monitor achievement and retention rates. The organisation has regularly monitored trainee achievement of NVQs to meet its contractual targets with TECs. However, until recently, there has been little evaluation of trainees' achievement of their individual training plans or key skills. Although trainee retention has improved significantly since inspection, rates are still unsatisfactory on some business administration courses. There are no formal strategies or procedures in place to attempt to address the high rates of trainees who leave their training early. There are few performance indicators to measure retention and achievement of individual training plans.

58. Inspectors considered the self-assessment report to be broadly accurate in its identification of strengths and some weaknesses. However, inspectors found different weaknesses from those identified in the self-assessment report. The grading arrangements were not sufficiently rigorous. The training manager led the action-planning process and involved most staff.