



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT OCTOBER 2000

Western Power Training

SUMMARY

Western Power Training provides good training in electrical installation and distribution. The off-the-job training resources are of a particularly high standard and offer a range of opportunities for apprentices to develop their skills. All the apprentices are employed and retention rates for both training programmes are high. The organisation places strong emphasis on equal opportunities issues, but there is no monitoring of equal opportunities in the workplace and no use of data to improve performance. Western Power Training provides effective pastoral support for its apprentices and a good employer induction, but has a weak progress review system. Management of training is satisfactory and the training provider places particular emphasis on health and safety matters. There is little co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training. Quality assurance arrangements are less than satisfactory with weaknesses particularly in the monitoring and evaluation of training.

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Construction	2

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

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ good off-the-job training
- ◆ extremely well-qualified and highly experienced training staff
- ◆ particularly good achievement and retention rates
- ◆ thorough equal opportunities policy
- ◆ good employer induction
- ◆ effective staff review and development process

KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ slow development of key skills training
- ◆ insufficient progress towards NVQ achievement
- ◆ insufficient review and evaluation of equal opportunities
- ◆ inadequate trainee review process
- ◆ insufficient quality assurance of NVQ programmes
- ◆ no internal verification of electrical distribution NVQ

INTRODUCTION

1. Western Power Distribution (WPD) is a regional electricity distribution company, which is part of the Southern Company Group of the United States of America. The company's head office is in Bristol with 13 operational sites throughout the south-west of England. Technical training for WPD is co-ordinated by its training department, Western Power Training (WPT), which is based in Taunton. WPT is also subcontracted to deliver training for a large employer based in Reading. WPT has contracts with PROSPER, Somerset and Wiltshire and Swindon Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), with PROSPER acting as the co-ordinating TEC for this inspection.

2. All of the practical off-the-job training is provided at WPT's main training centre in Taunton, Somerset. Additional qualifications are offered and taught through open learning. They are validated by a college of further education located in the north of England. At present, the company offers two modern apprenticeships. There are 27 apprentices on the electricity distribution and transmission programme and 42 apprentices on the electrical installation engineering modern apprenticeship programme.

3. One of the major influences on the electricity supply industry has been the opening of the electricity market to competition, which was completed in May 1999. During the period 1991-97, there was a considerable decline in the production/distribution of electricity business units. The decline of units in the south-western region was 43.1 per cent compared with the national decline of 2.7 per cent. During the last two years of this period, this changed to a slight increase of 4.8 per cent in the south-west, compared to an increase of 5.1 per cent in the United Kingdom as a whole.

4. Devon and Cornwall has an unemployment level of 4.5 per cent. In Somerset the figure is 2.3 per cent and in Wiltshire and Swindon the figure is less than 2 per cent. There is a minority ethnic population of 0.5 per cent in Devon and Cornwall. In Somerset it is 0.54 per cent and in Wiltshire and Swindon the figure is 1.68 per cent. All areas have a minority ethnic population figure well below the United Kingdom average of 5.49 per cent. In 1999, the proportion of school leavers in Devon and Cornwall achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 47.5 per cent, compared with the national average of 47.9 per cent. In Somerset, the figure was 52.7 per cent and in Wiltshire and Swindon, the figure was 51.9 per cent.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

5. WPT produced its first self-assessment report in 2000 following notification of the forthcoming Training Standards Council (TSC) inspection. The training support manager produced the report. There was no contribution from the training staff. Training and assessment, apprentices' achievements and resources were all graded separately. Sixty-one per cent of apprentices are following the electrical installation programme, the remainder are training in electricity distribution. It was agreed to report on the training provision under the occupational area of construction. Inspectors agreed with the self-assessment grades given for the occupational area and one of the generic areas. However, WPT did not identify some of the key weaknesses. In the other three generic areas inspectors gave lower grades than those of the self-assessment report.

6. A team of three inspectors spent a total of 13 days at WPT during October and November 2000. They visited six workplace depots, interviewed 17 apprentices and six workplace supervisors, and had discussions with the training provider's staff. Inspectors also examined policies and procedures, apprentices' files and portfolios, as well as assessment and verification files and documents. Three training sessions were observed, all of which were awarded a grade 2.

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Construction

Grade 2

7. WPT is based in Taunton and is the training department of WPD. WPT carries out training and assessment for a large electrical installation contractor as well as for its own apprentices. In the case of both companies, apprentices work at various sites across southern England. There are 69 apprentices on the construction programme, all of whom are modern apprentices and are employed. Twenty-seven modern apprentices are working towards the electricity distribution and transmission national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at level 2 and 42 are following the electrical installation modern apprenticeship programme at NVQ level 2. Electricity distribution and transmission apprentices specialise in specific skills, such as linesman, jointing or fitting, in their final phase of training. All apprentices are required to study for further education qualifications during their modern apprenticeship, which they do through open learning. This training is delivered by a college of further education based in the north of England. Apprentices attend off-the-job training on a block-release basis at WPT's specialised training centre. Both practical and theory work is given at this centre. The assessment of apprentices takes place on site as well as in the training centre in Taunton. All apprentices are assigned a work-based mentor by their employer to

support them while they work towards completion of their apprenticeship. Apprentice retention rates range from 85 to 100 per cent. In 1998, WPD received awards for their management of health and safety systems. The self-assessment report identified many strengths and some weaknesses. However, these strengths and weaknesses related to training and assessment, apprentices' achievements and resources, rather than the occupational area as a whole. Many of the strengths were considered to be no more than normal practice, or belonged to a generic area. Some strengths and weaknesses were correctly identified. Inspectors found additional strengths and weaknesses and agreed with the grade given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ particularly good off-the-job training
- ◆ excellent training centre resources
- ◆ training staff's exceptional range of qualifications and experience
- ◆ good achievement rates for academic qualifications
- ◆ good retention rates

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ slow development of key skills
- ◆ insufficient progress in NVQ achievement for some apprentices
- ◆ missed opportunities for assessment by observation in the workplace

8. Off-the-job training at the training centre is particularly good. The content of the training programme is well planned and well structured with lesson plans, handouts and transparencies available for all areas of training. Apprentices have a clear understanding of the content of each of the block release programmes and how they relate to their job. The teaching of practical skills is good and apprentices have every opportunity to practise and improve these skills. Assignments given to apprentices are well designed to ensure that their practical and technical skills are developed to the required standard.

9. There are extremely good resources at the training centre for both the electrical installation and the electrical distribution apprentices. The tools and materials available are more than adequate for training purposes. Apprentices work on industrial standard equipment and materials in a simulated environment. For example, electrical distribution apprentices carry out tasks on a small working sub-station or reduced-height pylons. Additional resources allow apprentices to practise pole climbing, rescue techniques and trench digging. Apprentices are able to gain valuable experience while working in a safe environment.

10. All training staff are exceptionally well qualified and experienced. They have a high degree of occupational competence and experience in their relevant trade. They all have many other practical and educational qualifications at various levels.

Of the seven staff delivering training, five have teaching qualifications and six have training and assessment qualifications. A new member of staff is scheduled to start a course leading to a training and assessment qualification in the near future. Training staff are often required to assist WPD with operational work as and when the need arises, allowing them to keep up to date with knowledge of current practices.

11. The apprentice retention rate is good, with average retention over the past four years remaining at 96 per cent. WPT analyses early leaver destinations and reasons for leaving. These reasons are generally personal or employment related and not connected with the training programme.

12. Achievement rates for academic qualifications are excellent. The current achievement rate is 100 per cent. Apprentices study for their qualifications by open learning, well supported by attendance at regular two-day tutorial sessions, five times a year. A help line is also available to all apprentices on both programmes. WPT also gives additional time for examination revision, and monitoring of progress is good. The open learning validating body contacts WPT when assignments are not handed in on time to prevent apprentices falling behind with their work. Some of the course content for the academic qualifications is also reinforced in theory sessions during the off-the-job training at WPT's training centre. This helps them to relate theory to practical applications in the workplace.

13. Despite such good academic achievement rates, development of key skills has been slow. Staff are not fully aware of the requirements of the modern apprenticeship structure in relation to key skills. Nor are they aware of how to ensure that apprentices fulfil these requirements. They also lack information about the new key skill qualification process. Apprentices themselves have little or no knowledge of what key skills are, and are generally unaware of the levels of key skills required and how they relate to their modern apprenticeship training.

14. There has been slow progress towards achievement of the NVQ for the electricity distribution and transmission apprentices who started in 1998. These apprentices have not been collecting evidence of their work to the range and standard necessary. This has meant that they are unable to present this evidence for assessment. However, there has been a change of staff since the first intake of apprentices, and all apprentices are now collecting work-based evidence to the standard required.

15. Apprentices are often engaged in a wide variety of workplace activities. However, due to staff's operational duties, opportunities for assessment by observation are missed. Assessment by training staff is only carried out on written evidence which is produced by the apprentice and countersigned by their supervisor.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 3

16. WPD has equal opportunities policies and procedures which meet contractual and legal requirements. One of WPD's human resources managers has responsibility for equal opportunities. The employee relations department controls advertisements for recruitment at WPD's head office. All apprentices receive equal opportunities information as part of their induction programme. At the time of inspection, there were no apprentices with disabilities and four apprentices from minority ethnic backgrounds. The ratio of people in the local area from minority ethnic groups is low, at 0.5 per cent. The training centre has been designed to provide access for people with mobility difficulties. One of the strengths identified in the self-assessment report was agreed with by inspectors and further strengths and weaknesses were identified. The grade given is lower than that awarded by WPD.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ extensive equal opportunities policy
- ◆ clear guidelines for carrying out equal opportunities policies
- ◆ positive staff approach to equal opportunities

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no monitoring of equal opportunities in the workplace
- ◆ insufficient review and evaluation of equal opportunities
- ◆ insufficient staff training in equal opportunities
- ◆ no collection and use of data to improve equal opportunities provision

17. WPT uses WPD's thorough and detailed equal opportunities policies and procedures. A manual has been produced by WPD which systematically covers all aspects of equal opportunities. Separate sections deal with recruitment, induction, discrimination, harassment and grievance procedures. These policies have been fully discussed with trade unions and copies are issued to all employees, including apprentices. They are posted on notice boards and publicised in the company magazine. The employer for whom WPT provides electrical installation training has its own similar equal opportunities policy.

18. There is a set of clear guidelines for carrying out WPD's equal opportunities policy effectively. These cover all aspects of discrimination as well as harassment in the workplace. The guidelines for preventing harassment contain case studies which highlight the consequences of unacceptable behaviour and the rights of apprentices to complain. WPD uses four 'golden rules' to help understanding of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1995*. These rules encourage staff to consider

policy, equipment and the environment from the point of view of disabled people.

19. Staff at WPT have a very positive approach to equal opportunities, and discrimination is not tolerated within the company. Apprentices have positive role models in their supervisors, who act as mentors and do not permit any form of discrimination or harassment. Apprentices have the same terms and conditions as all other employees and are subject to the same regulations.

20. Despite this positive approach to equality of opportunity, there is little structured training in this area. Although equal opportunities is covered at induction, understanding is not tested and apprentices' awareness of the issues is basic. Apprentices' awareness and understanding of equal opportunities are not reinforced during the training programme. The apprentices have little knowledge of their rights and responsibilities under the NVQ appeals procedure.

21. WPT does not monitor equal opportunities in the workplace, nor is it discussed or recorded at reviews. As a consequence, there is little information available to aid the continuous improvement of equal opportunities. While staff have developed an understanding of some of the key issues, there is no structured or planned staff-training programme. However, specialist advice is available through the human resource department of WPD.

Trainee support

Grade 3

22. WPT apprentices are recruited directly by their employers before they start training. Both WPT and the other main electrical contractor involved were once part of the same organisation, and so many aspects of support for apprentices are similar. All applicants to WPT are interviewed and take various ability tests, including a practical task. All apprentices are employed. The various employers involved carry out a full induction, and an introduction to the training programme itself is carried out at WPT's training centre. All apprentices are assigned a workplace mentor/supervisor and attend regular tutorial sessions to support their open learning programme. Training staff carry out reviews with apprentices both in the training centre and in the workplace. All apprentices also have access to professional counselling and medical services through their respective employers. The self-assessment report identified five strengths which inspectors considered to be parts of one major strength. The weakness indicated in the self-assessment report was considered to be only part of a greater weakness identified by inspectors. Inspectors identified other strengths and weaknesses and awarded the same grade as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ thorough apprentice selection process
- ◆ thorough employer induction for apprentices
- ◆ effective pastoral support for apprentices

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no systematic initial assessment of key skills
- ◆ inadequate progress-review process for most apprentices

GOOD PRACTICE

When apprentices attend off-the-job training on a block-release basis, accommodation and transport is arranged and funded by the training provider. If apprentices want to travel on a daily basis, WPT will arrange and pay for a hire car if necessary.

23. Prospective apprentices undergo a thorough selection process, carried out by their prospective employer. Potential apprentices are required to take a number of tests including numeracy, reasoning and psychometric assessment. They also carry out a practical test that is observed by experienced and qualified staff. The results of these tests, together with an interview, are used to decide the applicant's suitability for training. The effectiveness of this process is shown by high apprentice retention rates. Although this selection procedure ensures that apprentices have the potential to cope with the demands of the training programme, insufficient information from the results of the process is fed back to apprentices or detailed on their individual training plans.

24. Employers provide a thorough induction programme for all new apprentices. In the case of the employer who is the electrical contractor, arrangements are made for apprentices to spend a week at a college in the region. WPT inducts its apprentices over a six-week period that includes attendance for a week at an outdoor activity centre. The inductions are thorough and include terms and conditions, health and safety, first aid, manual lifting and outside practical activities such as climbing electricity distribution poles. In all cases, apprentices are well prepared before starting work and their training programme.

25. Apprentices receive effective personal support from both training staff and employers. They are assigned a workplace mentor by their employer. They meet with their mentor on a regular basis to discuss their progress during training and at work. All apprentices commented on the good level of support provided while working towards completion of their apprenticeships. Apprentices attend regular two-day tutorials, carried out by the open-learning centre staff, which are provided to support their academic qualification studies. Training centre staff are also available to help apprentices with any problems which they may encounter and to increase their learning through theory sessions during off-the-job training. The effectiveness of this support is confirmed by the good achievement rates. Training centre staff also encourage apprentices to seek support from them at any time during their apprenticeship. There are other forms of support available, such as independent counselling or medical services, through the apprentice's employer.

26. WBT's approach to key skills development is inadequate. Apprentices' key skills abilities are not systematically assessed at the start of training. WPT has no way of identifying possible additional needs for key skills training. The individual training plans contain no information of this type which could help the apprentices in achieving their qualifications

27. The progress-review process for the electrical installation apprentices is inadequate. Training staff visit these apprentices on a 12-weekly basis in the workplace, although some visits are behind schedule. The main aim of these visits

is to carry out an assessment on witness testimony evidence that the apprentice has collected since the previous visit. Apprentices are also given short-term targets relating to their NVQ during the assessment. Although a short discussion takes place on how the apprentice is generally progressing, the process is brief and no outcomes of this discussion are recorded. The workplace mentor and/or supervisor are sometimes involved in this process, but not on a regular basis. The progress reviews could also benefit from information gained at the formal review by mentors. This is not made available.

Management of training

Grade 3

28. WPT is a trading name for the training section of WPD. WPT has contracts with two TECs for the training of its own modern apprentices in electrical distribution. In addition, the organisation has a contract with these two TECs and another TEC to train modern apprentices in electrical installation for a large electrical contractor. The head office for WPT is based in Taunton, Somerset. The training centre is also located on the Taunton site. On-the-job training is organised by the individual WPD depots. The health and safety training manager has overall responsibility for training. Day-to-day management responsibility lies with the engineering training manager who is supported by seven training and five support staff. Academic courses are provided on an open learning basis with WPT acting as an examination centre. These courses are supported and validated by a college of further education in the north of England. WPT was accredited with the Investor in People award in 1996 and was successfully re-accredited in 1999. The organisation identified five strengths and no weaknesses in its self-assessment report. Inspectors were able to agree with the strengths relating to staff review and development. Two strengths were considered to be no more than normal practice, and one relating to staff qualifications was moved to the occupational area. Inspectors identified two weaknesses and additional strengths and awarded a lower grade than the one given by WPT.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ good management of health and safety issues
- ◆ strong internal lines of communication
- ◆ effective staff/apprentice review and development process

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no clear strategies for managing modern apprenticeship training
- ◆ insufficient co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training

29. WPT has a strong commitment throughout the organisation to providing the highest possible standards of health and safety management. During the induction process, apprentices are given supporting information relating to safe working

practices, including certificated first aid courses, fire safety and manual handling courses and other specialist training such as pole rescue techniques. Apprentices are provided with a good range of personal protective equipment. The reinforcement of health and safety practices continues into the practical off-the-job training. Relevant health and safety notices are publicised on virtually every wall in the practical training areas and apprentices show a high level of knowledge of health and safety practices as well as a high regard for the issues involved. A consistently high standard is maintained when apprentices are placed in operational depots. WPT complies with all regulations for entry into areas such as live sub-stations and ensures that no apprentice is given tasks which they have not been trained for, unless they are closely supervised by trained and authorised personnel.

30. The organisation has a strong informal approach to the management of training. Managers and training staff have operational roles in addition to their government-funded training responsibilities which means that they sometimes work in the actual business of electrical distribution. This style of management has resulted in extremely good internal communication links between off-the-job training staff and those responsible for on-the-job elements of the training programme. On a day-to-day basis, staff concerned in training programmes feel able to raise issues as and when they arise. These strong links extend to the major electrical employer for which Western Power Training provides training.

31. All staff at WPT have the opportunity to participate in a staff performance development review. This is a thorough process, which is extended to all apprentices as employees of WPD. A similar arrangement is in place for staff and employed apprentices involved in the modern apprenticeship in electrical installation. Although the performance development review is an annual process, all staff are encouraged to discuss business and personal development opportunities on an ongoing basis. The paperwork is well designed and gives detailed guidance on the review process, emphasising WPD's aim to encourage continuous professional development. Aims and objectives are agreed during the review process and recorded for future reviews. Staff/apprentice development opportunities have included information technology courses for administrative staff, assessor qualifications and nationally recognised teaching certificates.

32. WPT has plans in the short term for NVQ assessor training, which will provide a number of work-based assessors in the various depots and raise awareness of the requirements of modern apprenticeships. Other plans include the training of internal verifiers for the electrical distribution programme. However, WPT has not identified clear, measurable targets and has no long-term strategies for issues such as key skill development, assessment and accreditation or how work-based assessment will be managed for either of the modern apprenticeship programmes.

33. WPT has a well-planned and well-structured approach to off-the-job training. However, the link between on- and off-the-job training is weak. On-the-job training is provided through work teams based at depots across the south of England. For both programmes, this training is not well structured and is

dependent on the nature of the work available at any particular point in time. In the electrical installation programme there are isolated examples of staff organising the on-the-job training to match training activities being carried out at the training centre, but this does not extend to all apprentices in all programmes. There is insufficient co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training.

Quality assurance

Grade 4

34. WPD has a quality assurance management system, designed by a quality assurance manager and contained in its quality manual. All members of staff have a copy of the manual. WPD has achieved quality assurance recognition ISO 9001, which covers the preparation, production and teaching of training courses. Accreditation for this award was achieved in 1994 and re-accredited in 1998. External audit reports confirm that the company's quality assurance arrangements meet the contractual requirements of the TEC. The self-assessment report failed to identify some key weaknesses and inspectors awarded a grade lower than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ♦ positive approach by staff to quality of training

WEAKNESSES

- ♦ insufficient quality assurance of NVQ programmes
- ♦ no systematic evaluation of training
- ♦ no internal verification of electrical distribution NVQ

35. WPT staff have a positive approach to providing a good quality of training. The initiatives and attitude of training staff have helped to provide effective off-the-job training. This informal control, rather than the identification and implementation of written procedures, has encouraged apprentices to achieve well. Most of the training staff are former apprentices with WPD, who can use that experience to the benefit of current and future apprentices.

36. The formal quality assurance arrangements at WPD, however, do not ensure the quality of training and assessment within the NVQ programme. There is no systematic planning, monitoring or recording of training in the workplace. There are no procedures in place to ensure the consistent quality of on-the-job training. Current systems do not ensure consistently high standards of practice across NVQ programmes, and good practice is not routinely or systematically shared between staff.

37. There is insufficient evaluation of the quality of training measures for improvement, especially in the workplace. Where any monitoring and evaluation

take place, it is on a casual basis. For example, there is no collection of feedback from apprentices, trainers or subcontractors to provide information for improvement in training. There is no formal observation of training. There are no structured meetings to standardise the quality and teaching of NVQ programmes or to identify concerns.

38. Internal verification within the electrical installation training programme is satisfactory. Staff have developed an internal verification strategy that meets the requirements of the awarding body, and are developing procedures to improve internal verification still further. These include meetings to discuss issues to raise with external verifiers and questionnaires to identify staff training needs. This situation does not apply to the electrical distribution training programme, where no internal verification is currently taking place. Assessors are working with the external verifier to introduce an internal verification system to this programme, and to establish individual apprentice progress to date.

39. The self-assessment process is still new to WPT. It is not yet established in the quality assurance system or WPT's business plan. The report was produced without the help of the organisation's training staff and, as a result, most were unaware of its content. In many cases, the report was not sufficiently self-critical and failed to identify some key strengths and weaknesses in work-based training, especially for on-the-job training.