



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT NOVEMBER 1999

REINSPECTION FEBRUARY/MARCH 2001

Protocol Consultancy Services

SUMMARY

Protocol offers satisfactory training in travel. Off-the-job training is of a high standard, and a range of additional qualifications is available to trainees. However, trainees do not fully understand the assessment process. Assessment for customer service qualifications lacks rigour. The company ensures that trainees with disabilities have access to work placements. Equal opportunities are not systematically monitored in the workplace. Trainees are effectively supported by Protocol's staff and employers. They benefit from one-to-one coaching. However, individual training plans are not effectively used to record any support given to trainees. Staff are set regular targets, which they value. At the first inspection, quality assurance was unsatisfactory, with internal verification inconsistently applied to assessment. At reinspection, the internal verification procedures had been rewritten, and quality assurance was satisfactory, although some other procedures are not clear or followed consistently by staff.

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of the reinspection of Protocol Consultancy Services, the original published report text for quality assurance has been replaced by new text, which makes reference to the original inspection findings.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

GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Leisure, sport & travel	3

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

REINSPECTION	GRADE
Quality assurance	3

KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ good, well-structured off-the-job training
- ◆ additional qualifications available
- ◆ good access to the workplace for trainees with disabilities
- ◆ flexible one-to-one coaching
- ◆ effective target-setting for staff



KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ poor understanding by trainees of assessment
- ◆ lack of rigour in assessment of customer service qualification
- ◆ no systematic monitoring of equal opportunities in the workplace
- ◆ poor use of individual training plans

INTRODUCTION

1. Protocol Consultancy Services (Protocol) was established in 1993 to offer training and consultancy in travel and tourism. The company took on its first direct contract for providing training towards national vocational qualifications (NVQs) in 1996. At the time of the first inspection, it held contracts with Coventry and Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise (CCTE), which co-ordinated the first inspection and the reinspection, and Birmingham and Solihull Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) to offer NVQs in travel services at levels 2, 3 and 4. In addition, it had a subcontracting arrangement with a third TEC, Sandwell. Customer service is available as a secondary qualification. At the time of the first inspection, there were 76 trainees, comprising 47 modern apprentices, 21 national trainees and eight trainees on other work-based training programmes for young people, all of whom were employed in travel companies.

2. At reinspection, Protocol still holds contracts with Coventry and Warwickshire CCTE, Birmingham and Solihull TEC and Sandwell TEC. There are 106 trainees, 14 of whom are men. There are 73 advanced modern apprentices, 29 foundation modern apprentices and four trainees on other work-based training programmes for young people. As at the first inspection, trainees are employed in travel companies from across the region, including Tamworth, Lichfield, central Birmingham and its suburbs, Coventry, Kenilworth and Stratford upon Avon. Trainees take a range of qualifications, and currently there are seven taking NVQs at level 2 and six taking NVQs at level 3 in business administration. Five trainees are taking NVQs at level 2 and 14 are taking NVQs at level 3 in customer service, and in travel services, 25 trainees are taking NVQs at level 2, 36 trainees are taking NVQs at level 3 and six trainees are taking NVQs at level 4. There are seven trainees taking NVQs at level 3 in management. In addition to training towards NVQs, the company undertakes some private consultancy work within the travel industry.

3. Protocol moved to its current administrative base in Tamworth in December 1998. However, off-the-job training is provided mainly from its premises in Birmingham's city centre. This comprises three training rooms, one large enough for 20 trainees, and the other two for groups of 10, which are equipped with a range of presentation and audio-visual facilities. In April 2000, Protocol moved to a different floor in the building and, at the time of reinspection, was using two fully-equipped training rooms to accommodate 20 and 10 trainees.

4. At the time of the first inspection, the company was run by its two directors, and employed two full-time members of staff, who combined administrative roles with some training and assessment. A further two people assessed or internally verified on a sessional basis. At reinspection there were three full-time members of staff, the managing director, a new director and an administrator, who also is a qualified assessor for NVQs in travel services. The previous part-time director left the company early in 2000 and the new full-time director has been in post since May 2000. She was recruited directly from the travel industry. There are several

part-time consultants employed for specific specialist roles.

5. The company operates across a wide geographic region, which is physically and sociologically diverse. Coventry and Warwickshire is one of the more prosperous parts of the West Midlands, with average gross weekly wages exceeding those of the West Midlands as a whole, although remaining slightly lower than the national average. There was a downturn in the economy at the start of the decade, which has now been recovered to some extent, and at the time of the first inspection unemployment was high at 21 per cent, compared with 3.8 per cent nationally. Most jobs are found in public and financial services, and in wholesale and retail distribution. In 1998-99, nearly 68 per cent of year-11 pupils elected to stay on in full-time education, and a further 21 per cent opted for employment with training. The latter figure is high compared with the national average of 6.6 per cent.

6. In a survey carried out in 1998 by the Department for Education and Employment, Birmingham was identified as the fifth most deprived local authority area in the United Kingdom. Manufacturing, especially in the automotive trade, remains a key industry for the area. However, more companies are relocating out of the region than are choosing to set up there. Tourism, particularly business tourism, is a growth industry for the area. In recent years, Birmingham has been some way behind neighbouring areas in terms of the qualification and skills base of its resident labour force. In 1998, the percentage of school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 36 per cent, compared with the national average of 46.3 per cent.

7. In the year 2000, the percentage of school leavers achieving five or more GCSEs at grade C and above varied across the Protocol's region, between 30.7 per cent in Sandwell to 46 per cent in Stratford upon Avon. These percentages are lower than the national average of 49.2 per cent. In January 2001, unemployment across the company's region varied between 6.4 per cent in Birmingham and 6 per cent in Sandwell to 1.2 per cent in Stratford upon Avon, compared with the national average of 3.5 per cent.

INSPECTION FINDINGS

8. The company's self-assessment report for the first inspection was written by one of the directors, and incorporated the views of staff, trainees and employers. The report was updated shortly before the inspection, and the self-assessment grades were higher than those in the first inspection. The report does not follow the format in *Raising the Standard*, as it gives three grades for the occupational area, as well as an overall grade. A post inspection action plan was submitted to the Training Standards Council (TSC) following publication of the inspection report in March 2000. A full self-assessment report for reinspection was submitted in February 2001 and all grades were above those awarded at the first inspection. This report did follow the format specified in *Raising the Standard* and was compiled following consultation with staff and trainees.

9. In November 1999, a team of four inspectors spent a total of 12 days at Protocol's premises. They visited 17 work placements, and interviewed 30 trainees, 11 workplace supervisors, and three members of the company's staff. They observed one training session, which was graded a two, one induction, and one assessment. They reviewed a range of documents, including 17 trainees' work portfolios, trainees' files, work placement files, staff information, company policies and procedures.

10. Reinspection of quality assurance was carried out at the end of February, and beginning of March 2001. Two inspectors spent a total of six days with Protocol. The inspectors visited seven workplaces, interviewed five workplace supervisors, and 16 trainees, and inspected NVQ portfolios and trainees' files. Five of Protocol's staff were interviewed. A range of documents was inspected, including internal verification records, company policies and procedures and staff information. No training sessions were observed.

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

Leisure, sport & travel

Grade 3

11. There are 76 trainees following NVQ programmes with Protocol. Forty-seven are modern apprentices working towards NVQs at levels 2 and 3 in travel services, and 21 are national trainees. A further eight youth trainees are undertaking NVQs at level 2 in travel services. Some trainees take NVQs in customer service at levels 2 and 3, in addition to their travel qualifications. All trainees are employed in independent retailing, telesales and business-travel companies in Birmingham, Staffordshire and Warwickshire. Trainees attend off-the-job sessions one day each month. Qualified assessors from Protocol conduct assessments of trainees' work. Achievement rates are above average for the sector. The self-assessment report for this area identified many strengths, a number of which represented no more than

normal practice. Inspectors did not agree with all the strengths. All but one of the seven weaknesses identified by the company referred to issues outside the company's control. Key weaknesses identified by inspectors, especially those relating to assessment practice, were not recognised by Protocol. The grade awarded is lower than that given by the company.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ strong support from employers for trainees
- ◆ good-quality, well-structured off-the-job training
- ◆ flexible off-the-job training arrangements
- ◆ additional qualifications available

POOR PRACTICE

This example highlights poor practice in the use of witness testimonies to prove trainees' competence in the workplace. Witness statements are given to each trainee which have been written and pre-printed with a space to write in the trainee's name. These statements are not personalised to the trainee's job role or workplace. They do not provide a clear or detailed account of the work that the individual trainee has carried out to merit the witness testimony.

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of understanding by trainees of assessment process
- ◆ lack of rigour in customer service assessment
- ◆ poor use of assessment by observation

12. Trainees, work-based supervisors and travel agency managers are very positive about the NVQ programme, and recognise the benefits of NVQ training. Many work-based supervisors have already achieved, or are undertaking, an NVQ or additional qualification through Protocol. They are able to use their knowledge of the company's way of working to provide effective guidance for trainees. In addition, Protocol issues them with a tutor's pack which outlines their role and responsibilities with regard to the supervision of trainees in the workplace. Work-based supervisors act as good role models for trainees, and their support for NVQs motivates trainees, and encourages them to succeed. Most employers provide trainees with regular study time, especially during less busy times of the year. Trainees are given time to attend off-the-job sessions, and this requirement is written into Protocol's contract with employers.

13. Trainees attend off-the-job training for their travel services NVQ one day each month. Trainees and supervisors are issued with a schedule which gives the dates of sessions, and indicates the topics which will be covered. Training sessions are held at a well-equipped business centre. They are of a high standard and incorporate a range of learning techniques, including theory, discussion, practical activities and question and answer sessions. Tests are set to check trainees' knowledge and understanding. Appropriate teaching materials are used, including current travel resources alongside workbooks produced by Protocol. Time is allocated at the beginning of each session for trainees' progress reviews, and for assessment. The final session of the day involves action-planning by trainees. Trainees and supervisors value the training, and see it as being essential in providing product knowledge to support working in the travel sector. Two off-the-job training groups are run each month, on different dates. These are attended by

between eight and 12 trainees. If they are unable to attend their scheduled session, trainees have the opportunity to join a different group. If trainees are finding the work difficult or have missed a session, Protocol's staff provide additional training in the workplace. This flexibility enables trainees to benefit fully from the off-the-job training programme. Separate training sessions are held each year for the customer service NVQ. These are supplemented by workbooks on customer service and selling skills. In a few cases, additional customer service training sessions are held on employers' premises.

14. Protocol's staff encourage trainees to continue with their training and development. Additional qualifications are available to all trainees in International Air Transport Association (IATA) approved airfares and ticketing at levels 1 and 2 (offered either on an intensive or day-release basis), NVQs in customer service, business administration and either the business or retailing strand of travel services to complement the main qualification. The range of additional qualifications available, some of which are offered at no extra cost, enables trainees to broaden their experience, improve their employability, and see clear progression routes onto complementary or higher-level NVQs.

GOOD PRACTICE

During a training session, many examples of good learning techniques were demonstrated. This included the sharing of good news to encourage individuals to participate at the start of the session, trainees writing their own objectives for the session and agreeing on these with the trainer, and clear links with previous training sessions. Training packs developed by Protocol were used to aid focused note taking and to encourage trainees to reflect on their own work practice. Trainees were actively involved and interested throughout the training session.

15. Key skills training sessions are planned, and trainees collect evidence towards this part of their programme. Key skills are assessed separately on the travel services programme through cross-referencing existing portfolio evidence, and additional activities. Most trainees have a good understanding of key skills. However, some travel agency managers and work-based supervisors have little understanding of key skills, and where they fit into their trainees' programme.

16. With the exception of key skills, the assessment process is led by assessors, particularly on the travel services level 2 and 3 programmes. It demands little of trainees in terms of identifying evidence requirements or building a portfolio of work. Trainees' portfolios are structured into a series of evidence wallets which contain checklists detailing evidence to be collected and activities for trainees to complete. These wallets are cross-referenced to the NVQ units, but not to the elements. Trainees are not fully familiar with the NVQ standards, and take limited responsibility for deciding what evidence they should collect. They have a limited understanding of the NVQ structure, and have little knowledge of the elements, performance criteria of their NVQ. Assessment planning is focused on completion of evidence wallets, or of specific tasks, with little obvious planning of assessment of units or observation. Trainees are unclear about the assessment process, which they see as being completion of the wallets. They do not understand, for example, the purpose of other forms of assessment, such as witness testimony or observation of performance. Trainees undertaking a customer service qualification are issued with a copy of the NVQ standards. However, when building their portfolios, they still rely on the checklist supplied in the evidence wallets, rather than using the standards fully.

17. Travel services portfolios contain a wide range of evidence and personal statements from trainees which fully cover the NVQ unit requirements. For the customer service qualification, however, much of the evidence submitted takes the

form of personal statements and task sheets from the trainee which are not always witnessed by a supervisor, or supported with evidence. Prior achievement on the travel services NVQ is used in the assessment of each unit of the customer service qualification. There is no specific cross-referencing of travel services' evidence to the customer service performance criteria. Evidence within trainees' customer service portfolios does not fully meet the NVQ performance criteria and range statements for many of the units. In trainees' portfolios for level 3 customer service there is insufficient evidence to establish competence for whole elements of one particular unit, but the trainees in question have been assessed as competent. The awarding body requirements for performance evidence are not being met at either level 2 or 3 of the customer service qualification in five out of the eight portfolios examined.

18. Assessment by observation is minimal on all programmes and some trainees have never been assessed in this way. What little observation is done in the workplace is often completed without the trainees' prior knowledge and some trainees are not sure why they are being observed. These observations are referenced to the evidence wallets, or to specific units, but some are not linked to NVQ performance criteria or aspects of the NVQ range. This has been identified as an issue for concern on the latest external verifier's report for customer service. Action has been taken to address it. A new recording system has recently been introduced for customer service observations which requires assessors' observations to be linked to performance criteria and range. It is too early to say how effective this will be.

GENERIC AREAS

Equal opportunities

Grade 3

19. Protocol has an equal opportunities policy which is made available to staff and trainees. The managing director takes responsibility for equal opportunities issues. The company operates within a wide geographical area with substantial variations in the proportion of minority ethnic groups. There are few minority ethnic trainees on programmes with Protocol, and most of the trainees are women, which reflects the traditional recruitment pattern in the travel industry. The self-assessment report was accurate in its identification of some strengths, although many of these represented simply contractual compliance, and others were not relevant to this aspect. One weakness was correctly identified during self-assessment, although the company did not recognise its own responsibility for the issue concerned. The grade awarded by inspectors is the same as that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ comprehensive equal opportunities policy
- ◆ good access to the workplace for those with mobility difficulties

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no systematic monitoring of equal opportunities in the workplace
- ◆ lack of strategy to develop equal opportunities

20. Protocol's equal opportunities policy covers all aspects of the relevant legislation, including gender, ethnicity, sexuality, marital status, disability, age and criminal record. The policy was last reviewed and amended in July 1999 as part of the self-assessment process. The managing director takes full responsibility for equal opportunities within the company, and has a thorough understanding of the legal issues relating to equal opportunities. These are discussed with staff. Equal opportunities is covered during the induction programme and all trainees are given an induction pack which includes the company's equal opportunities policy. Trainees show an awareness of equal opportunities, although they have poor recall of the issues discussed during induction. They understand the grievance and appeals procedures.

21. Equal opportunities data are collected when trainees start their programme. They are analysed, and used to identify groups which are under-represented on training programmes. Some attempts are made to target under-represented groups. For example, schools in different geographical areas have been directly approached in an attempt to attract trainees from minority ethnic groups. However, such efforts are neither regular, nor systematic. They have not been successful in encouraging young people from minority ethnic groups to access training, particularly in the Coventry and Warwickshire area. The approaches have not been evaluated to see how they might be improved, and different strategies have not been identified. The company undertakes little advertising. It has few marketing materials. Those which it uses carry an equal opportunities statement, but do not contain positive images. Where issues of discrimination become obvious, Protocol is responsive to them, and staff are prepared to take positive action if they consider that a trainee is being discriminated against. For example, one trainee who was experiencing discrimination in the workplace was helped to find employment with another travel agent and went on to complete the NVQ and, ultimately, to gain promotion. The employer who had acted in a discriminatory manner was removed from Protocol's list of placements. However, the company reacts to situations, rather than taking the lead. It complies with TEC and statutory requirements, but devises few initiatives, and does not evaluate the action it undertakes. Equal opportunities is not a regular agenda item at staff meetings, and the company does not have an equal opportunities plan, or a strategy to ensure that it continues to develop in this area.

22. Protocol has strong links with two work placements which have good access and facilities for trainees who are wheelchair users. These were actively sought out

when the company had to turn away a trainee who was a wheelchair user because a suitable placement could not be found. Protocol is now able to ensure that placements are available for any trainee with impaired mobility. The venue used for off-the-job training also has good access.

23. The company's formal monitoring of equal opportunities in the workplace is infrequent, and insufficient. Monitoring is not carried out in its own right, but forms part of a health and safety audit which is carried out when placements are set up, and twice-yearly after that. It consists simply of checking that the employer has a policy and recording the named person responsible for equal opportunities. No other workplace monitoring takes place to ensure that trainees are not being discriminated against, that employers understand their responsibilities in terms of equal opportunities and that trainees understand their rights with regard to issues such as bullying or harassment. Equal opportunities are not explored directly during progress reviews. Trainees are asked if they are having any problems in a general sense, but the discussion is not related to equal opportunities. The company had introduced a module on equal opportunities into its NVQ level 4 in travel services. Shop managers participating in the level 4 programme, therefore, have access to some equal opportunities training. Some other employers, however, demonstrate little knowledge of equal opportunities and of their legal responsibilities with regard to recruitment.

Trainee support

Grade 3

24. Trainees are recruited through the Employment Service, during recruitment evenings or by direct referrals from employers. Most are already employed, and their training is arranged by their employer. Induction is carried out either during a one-day session, held twice a year, or on a one-to-one basis in the workplace. Most trainees' progress reviews take place during off-the-job training days. Some reviews are also held during workplace visits. Trainees receive ongoing support from Protocol's staff and from work-based supervisors. Where applicable, trainees' prior qualifications and experience are accredited. The self-assessment report highlighted many strengths which were deemed to be no more than normal practice. The one weakness identified was not regarded by inspectors as significant. The company failed to identify key weaknesses in its review system and in its recording of trainee support. The grade awarded is lower than that given in the self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effective and flexible one-to-one coaching
- ◆ effective support for trainees seeking employment
- ◆ good retention

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ ineffective initial assessment
- ◆ poor use of individual training plans
- ◆ weak review process

25. Induction is carried out twice a year for one day or in a one-to-one session in the workplace. The programme, trainees' roles, rights and responsibilities are explained. An induction workbook is used and there are activities to complete in the workplace. Trainees find induction beneficial, and most are able to recall the key issues covered.

26. Most trainees are visited in the workplace approximately every eight weeks, when they receive help with portfolio development. Between visits, they are given contact numbers for company staff so that any difficulties they experience can be resolved at an early stage. They are encouraged to ring at any time within or outside working hours. Employers value the support available from Protocol's staff, and their prompt response to queries or issues of concern. Trainees who are experiencing difficulties in completing any part of their programme can have individual coaching sessions. These often take place outside normal working hours. For example, one assessor recently worked every other Sunday for several weeks to provide additional support for one trainee. This flexibility enables trainees to move smoothly through their qualifications. Trainees who have taken advantage of one-to-one sessions have found them extremely beneficial.

27. All trainees are employed. Those who experience difficulties with employers or colleagues are given effective practical support to find another suitable job within the travel industry. Arrangements are then made with the new employer for them to complete their qualification. These trainees value the help, guidance and support on offer from Protocol staff. A high number of trainees remain on training programmes. Over the past three years, the average retention rate for trainees has been 94.4 per cent which is higher than average for the industry.

28. The company has designed its own system for the initial assessment of trainees. This takes the form of a questionnaire containing 50 items relating to finance, general knowledge, spelling and geography. Trainees are required to obtain a minimum score of 25. If they do not achieve this, they have to complete the same questionnaire one month later. Trainees have little understanding of the purpose of the initial assessment, and refer to it as the geography test. They are told what marks they have achieved, but not what these mean. The test has little value as a diagnostic tool, and does not allow for the systematic identification of additional support needs. There is no initial assessment of their key skills.

29. Sometimes additional training or support needs are identified by assessors as they work with trainees. When this occurs, the company arranges appropriate support. For example, one trainee with dyslexia was helped to make an application for additional time to complete an examination. Where outside assistance is

required, this is requested and arranged by the company. Additional support provided from an outside source is usually recorded on the trainee's individual training plan. However, additional support offered by staff is not systematically recorded on the individual training plan, nor is it recorded on progress review forms. This means that there is no accurate overview of each trainee's needs. The system is dependent on the company staff's knowledge of the support requirements of individuals. Individual training plans sometimes contain the results of initial assessment, but do not indicate what these mean for the individual's training programme. They are not updated to reflect achievement, and are not used as working documents. Trainees are unclear about the purpose of their individual training plan, and some do not have copies of them. An additional copy of the individual training plan is held in the company's administrative office, but this is not made available to trainees unless they specifically request it.

30. Reviews take place during off-the-job training sessions and sometimes during workplace visits. Although work-based supervisors are later informed of the outcome of the review, they are not otherwise involved in the process. There is no system to enable a regular three-way discussion between the supervisor, trainee and assessor, although this does take place if problems have been identified. They do not have the opportunity to work as a team to agree on short-term targets, and to move the training forward. Individual training plans are not always used as the basis of reviews, and are not always updated following them. Discussions are, however, recorded on the trainee's action plan. Trainees do not recognise reviews as an important part of their training programme and are confused about their purpose. Some trainees describe reviews as always being part of the assessment process.

Management of training

Grade 3

31. Protocol is run by a full-time managing director, and another, part-time director. A further two full-time staff combine administrative roles with some assessment and internal verification. Two other assessor/verifiers work for the company on a part-time basis. Protocol has procedures for staff recruitment, induction and appraisal. New staff receive a formal induction, followed by a period of on-the-job training. All employees have a contract of employment. The company achieved the Investors in People Standard in December 1998 and is currently preparing for re-assessment in January 2000. Protocol has exceeded its TEC targets for the past two years, and its contracts have increased steadily. The self-assessment report is partially accurate in the judgements made about this aspect of provision. Some of the issues raised refer to quality assurance rather than management, and a number of the strengths are simply contractual compliance. Actions are identified to address weaknesses, but they refer to specific administrative functions, and are insufficient to ensure improvement. Inspectors awarded a lower grade than that given by Protocol.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ effective target-setting
- ◆ thorough staff development

WEAKNESSES

- ◆ staffing stretched at busy times of year
- ◆ no system to co-ordinate on- and off-the-job training

32. Protocol has a thorough and well-organised system for reviewing staff performance, and for individual target-setting. On joining the company, employees negotiate a detailed action plan, which sets out their personal targets for staff development. They meet with the managing director every month to review their progress against the action plan, and to update it where appropriate. Staff consider that the targets help them to focus their efforts and to manage their work roles effectively. In addition to the monthly meetings, employees attend a formal quarterly review, during which they discuss their work performance in more depth with the managing director, and identify both successes and areas for improvement. This is supplemented by an annual appraisal, during which the employee's overall progress during the year is summarised. Both the quarterly reviews and the appraisal are clearly recorded, and are kept in the employee's individual portfolio. Staff value the opportunity this gives them to evaluate and discuss their performance. Part of the review process involves the identification of appropriate staff development opportunities. These are based around both individual needs, and the business requirements of the company. Employees are actively encouraged to access a wide range of development opportunities, including NVQs, training qualifications and health and safety awards. They are given clear timescales for achievement. Individual staff development opportunities are set in the context of the company's annual staff development plan.

33. Protocol has a detailed business plan, which is reviewed annually. This includes information about the company's financial position and marketing strategy, and a discussion of progress against the previous year's targets. It sets clear business objectives for the year to come. Referred to as milestones, they are simply and effectively described in a way which is meaningful for staff. The milestones are discussed during quarterly staff meetings, and are reviewed and updated as necessary. Employees have a clear view of the company's overall aim, its annual objectives and its progress against TEC contractual targets.

34. The company's managing director carries most of the responsibility for the management and provision of training and assessment, and some responsibility for internal verification, as well as undertaking some private consultancy work. The other director carries out some assessment and some internal verification, and oversees the company's financial affairs, but spends only about 25 per cent of his time on Protocol's business. One of the full-time employees has been with the company for less than a year; the other for just over a year. Their roles are

developing to include some training, assessment and verification, but they are not yet working to their full potential in these capacities. Protocol used to have an additional full-time trainer, but she left earlier in the year, and was not replaced. The managing director, with some help from part-time employees, spends a substantial part of her time away from the office, training and visiting trainees in the workplace. Her absence from the office puts pressure on administrative staff, who are often not in a position to make decisions without her, and are sometimes unable to contact her for substantial periods of the day. The fact that there are only two administrators further complicates matters since, if one of them is away because of sickness, the workload has to be shared among remaining colleagues. There is currently a lack of effective delegation from the managing director, while other full-time members of staff are still training for aspects of their role, or are completing their probationary period with the company. There are plans for them to become more actively involved in wider aspects of the company's business, but it is too early to say how effectively this will be achieved. Although some strategic issues, such as business-planning, are well managed within Protocol, others, such as quality assurance and equal opportunities, are not always addressed effectively.

35. Most trainees attend off-the-job training for one day a month, and are visited in the workplace every six to eight weeks. Work-based supervisors are sent a programme which indicates which topic will be covered during each session, but this does not include the level of detail required to ensure that they will be able to supplement the off-the-job training with appropriate practice and experience in the workplace. Approximately 80 per cent of workplace supervisors have undertaken NVQs themselves. Their understanding of the qualification is good, and they are able to give their trainees the practical support and guidance required. However, their understanding of issues such as key skills is limited. Supervisors are all given a guidance pack, and those who lack experience with NVQs are contacted more frequently than the others. However, the guidance given by Protocol does not include information about how to plan and provide on-the-job training. There are no opportunities for the sharing of experience or good practice between employers.

Quality assurance

Grade 3

36. Protocol holds contracts with three TECs and meets all their contractual requirements. The company has been an approved centre with one awarding body since February 1998 to assess NVQs at levels 2 to 4. The managing director is responsible for quality assurance within the company, and she produced the first self-assessment report in July 1998. This has an annual cycle for being updated. There have been changes in staff since the first inspection and the company now has a managing director, a director, one further full-time member of staff and several part-time consultants. The managing director, who is the senior internal verifier, carries out regular audits of the work of the other members of staff in training and assessment as well as auditing trainees' files. Trainees formally evaluate their programmes after every training session, mid-way through training and at the end of the programmes. Feedback from employers is both formal and

informal. The company monitors equal opportunities' statistics, complaints and health and safety in the workplace. Staff monitor and record the destinations of trainees who leave the programmes, and check their reasons for leaving.

At the first inspection, the main weaknesses identified were:

- ◆ quality assurance system lacks coherence
- ◆ inconsistent internal verification
- ◆ uncritical self-assessment

37. The last two weaknesses have been rectified and the other weakness has improved in part. The internal verification procedures have been rewritten since the first inspection. The procedures now clearly indicate that sampling plans should be drawn up every six months and that all assessors should be observed systematically by an internal verifier. Computerised paperwork for sampling plans, which show the planned and the actual dates of verification, has been recently introduced. The managing director is the senior internal verifier, and she observes two assessors. The director's own assessments are internally verified by another qualified member of staff. The internal verifier for NVQs at level 4 is sent the notes from the internal verification meetings as he is unable to attend. Interim internal verification of portfolios for NVQ level 4 was requested of him for the first time during the reinspection. Internal verification sampling plans, however, are cumbersome. They have dates associated with the work of each group of trainees, rather than for the work of each assessor. Documents are filed by date order not by assessor. This means that the file has to be looked through thoroughly or cross-referenced to another file, which holds the individual assessors' assessment monitoring sheets to gain an overall picture. This can be a lengthy process. Internal verification meetings focus on issues such as concerns raised by the awarding body, the number of portfolios to be seen and any problems encountered by trainees, rather than on assessment issues and any training and development needs identified for assessors. However, training sessions are provided for the development of the assessors' knowledge and skills. The recent workshops have included consideration of revised NVQ standards, the use of live observations and assessing key skills. The new grading system for marking trainees' portfolios and grading assessors' performance is, however, very confusing, especially when followed individually. The self-assessment report for reinspection was thorough. Inspectors agreed with one strength, but not with a further three. The three weaknesses were found by inspectors to be symptomatic of one combined weakness. The grade awarded is the same as that given by Protocol in its February 2001 self-assessment report.

STRENGTHS

- ◆ thorough evaluation of trainees' views
- ◆ good strategic planning to address weaknesses

WEAKNESSES

◆ insufficiently implemented quality assurance arrangements

38. Protocol has a firmly established evaluation system which was recognised during the first inspection and confirmed at reinspection. It is based on a series of questionnaires requesting feedback from trainees which have been adjusted and improved upon each year. These changes have been made in response to the Protocol's ongoing analysis of the usefulness of feedback gathered through the questionnaires. The series of individually designed questionnaires is issued to trainees at the end of each off-the-job training session, halfway through the trainees' programmes and every time they complete an NVQ. The results are analysed and used to improve training practice. For example, the structure of one course was altered as a result of feedback from trainees, and the venue of another was changed to meet trainees' travel requirements. Quality assurance systems are at various stages of development within the company. Some are more established than others, with some still in pilot stages. Feedback from employers is mainly collected informally and this is based on excellent long-standing working relationships between Protocol and a range of travel companies. Views of work-based supervisors are sought on the trainees' quarterly review form. Recently, the need for more formal evaluation was recognised and a pilot questionnaire was distributed at the end of last year. The company recognises that the questions used were too open and so the results were difficult to collate. A revised version has been designed to be used in March 2001. The recently updated guidelines pack for employers contains a new form to get employers' views and their responses are currently being collated.

39. Considered strategic planning has resulted in a number of changes since the last inspection. There are clear staff roles which are understood by staff, work-based supervisors and trainees. Staff no longer carry out a variety of roles with the same trainees. This change has helped trainees identify more clearly the activity being undertaken. For example staff and trainees can now identify a difference between training, assessment and review sessions and for internal verification activities. Training is mostly carried out by full-time members of staff. The quality assurance procedures for activities such as recruitment, initial assessment, approval of employer, progress reviews and assessment visits, have been updated in each of the past two years. The monitoring of equal opportunity statistics led the company to try encouraging more male applicants, although this strategy has not yet been successful. Three quality assurance forums have been introduced, to encourage feedback and discussion about improvements from trainees, employers and workplace mentors. The first meetings for each group were held between December 2000 and February 2001. Suggestions from the groups include: work-study plans being introduced for the business administration trainees; the criteria for grading NVQ portfolios be given to all trainees and that the new guidelines for employers be issued. Action is also being taken to give trainees visits to cruising or tour-operating companies to broaden their travel-industry experience. The forums are new and as training sessions do not take place in January, some trainees have not yet received feedback from their representatives. Nevertheless, some suggestions from trainees have been accepted and acted upon quickly by the

company. A further round of meetings is planned for the summer.

40. Several of the documents used by the company are multi-purpose, and many sections for new information have been added over the year. Current documents will only be used until the end of March 2001, as there are many new coded documents which have been designed for use from the first of April with the new financial year's contracts. An example of the problem with some current forms is the form used when assessing trainees by observation in the workplace. The front and reverse of this form are used for different purposes, and there is no designated space for trainees and assessors' names on each side for when the form is photocopied to be put into trainees' NVQ portfolios. In addition, forms currently completed by internal verifiers when observing assessments do not have a designated space for identifying the type of assessment, and the feedback recorded is sometimes very brief. At present, the use of the words 'review', 'assessment' and 'observation' is unclear and sometimes interchangeable when used to describe activities on the documents. In addition, some documents do not have the company name or an indicator of the version of the document. Recently, however, an information technology consultant has been employed for three hours a week to develop new monitoring systems. He has also helped produce the new documents for the next financial year and is training staff in computing skills.