

TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL INSPECTION REPORT  
JULY 2000

ADULT LEARNING INSPECTORATE REINSPECTION  
DECEMBER 2001

# Apex Management Consultants Limited



ADULT LEARNING  
INSPECTORATE

## Adult Learning Inspectorate

The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) was established under the provisions of the *Learning and Skills Act 2000* to bring the inspection of all aspects of adult learning and work-based training within the remit of a single inspectorate. The ALI is responsible for inspecting a wide range of government-funded learning, including:

- ◆ work-based training for all people over 16
- ◆ provision in further education colleges for people aged 19 and over
- ◆ the University for Industry's **learn**direct provision
- ◆ adult and community learning
- ◆ training given by the Employment Service under the New Deals.

Inspections are carried out in accordance with the *Common Inspection Framework* by teams of full-time inspectors and part-time associate inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in, the work which they inspect. All providers are invited to nominate a senior member of their staff to participate in the inspection as a team member.

## Grading

In summarising their judgements about the quality of provision in curriculum or occupational areas and about the quality of leadership and management, including quality assurance and equality of opportunity, inspectors use a five-point scale. The descriptors for the five grades are:

- ◆ grade 1 – outstanding
- ◆ grade 2 – good
- ◆ grade 3 – satisfactory
- ◆ grade 4 – unsatisfactory
- ◆ grade 5 – very weak.

## SUMMARY

The original inspection of Apex Management Consultants Limited was carried out by the Training Standards Council's inspectors. The inspection resulted in less than satisfactory grades being awarded for equal opportunities and quality assurance. These areas have been reinspected against the requirements of the *Common Inspection Framework* by the Adult Learning Inspectorate, which replaced the Training Standards Council on 1 April 2001. The sections of the original report dealing with equal opportunities and quality assurance been replaced with the findings of the reinspection. Also, the report summary, report introduction and introduction to the inspection findings have been updated and reflect the findings of the reinspection. Sections of the report, dealing with areas which have not been reinspected, have been left in their original form. The amended inspection report is published on the Adult Learning Inspectorate's website ([www.ali.gov.uk](http://www.ali.gov.uk)).

**Apex Management Consultants Limited provide satisfactory work-based learning in insurance for modern apprentices. The resources for training are good. At the time of the original inspection, the company's policy on equal opportunities did not reflect what was then current legislation. There were no checks on whether or not employers had their own policies of equal opportunities. At the time of the reinspection, the company had a satisfactory policy on equal opportunities. Data on equal opportunities are now analysed in detail. Trainers provide learners with prompt assistance and pastoral support is good. Progress reviews are frequent. Although there is a move to make management systems more formal, the company relies heavily on informal methods of working. At the time of the original inspection, the company had good arrangements for gathering feedback from learners on the quality of training, but it did not have an effective quality assurance system. By the time of the reinspection, the company had established clear, comprehensive and effective procedures for quality assurance.**

### GRADES

| OCCUPATIONAL AREAS        | GRADE |
|---------------------------|-------|
| Management & professional | 3     |

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

| REINSPECTION        | GRADE |
|---------------------|-------|
| Equal opportunities | 3     |
| Quality assurance   | 2     |

### KEY STRENGTHS

- ♦ excellent working relationships with learners and employers
- ♦ frequent visits to learners by trainers/assessors

- ◆ wide range of evidence in portfolios
- ◆ good resources
- ◆ good understanding of equal opportunities among staff, learners and employers
- ◆ strong pastoral support
- ◆ good internal communications
- ◆ effective evaluation of performance data
- ◆ comprehensive and effective quality assurance system

#### **KEY WEAKNESSES**

- ◆ poor presentation of work in portfolios
- ◆ learners' lack of access to their portfolios
- ◆ training plans not influenced by initial assessment
- ◆ failure to co-ordinate on- and off-the-job training effectively
- ◆ incomplete set of management procedures
- ◆ insufficient monitoring of employers' promotion of equal opportunities in the workplace
- ◆ insufficient monitoring of training in the workplace

## INTRODUCTION

1. Apex Management Consultants Limited (APEX) is a specialist insurance and financial services training company with an office in West Sussex. At the time of the original inspection, the company had held a contract to provide work-based learning with Sussex Enterprise, the former local training and enterprise council (TEC). At the time of the reinspection, the company held a similar contract with the Sussex Learning and Skills Council (local LSC). At the time of the original inspection, 36 learners were receiving modern apprenticeship training in insurance. By the time of the reinspection, the number of learners had increased to 47. The learners are employed in companies across Sussex. Most training takes place on the job. Apex is an accredited centre for an awarding body and it offers training in a wide range of subjects including insurance, life assurance, customer service, key skills, supervision and management as well as training and development. Two big insurance companies use Apex in a subcontracting role for their in-house modern apprenticeship programmes, but Apex has no subcontracting arrangements with other organisations. As well as government-funded training, the company offers commercial consultancy services and commercial training for staff working in large organisations such as banks and private health care companies. Apex has two directors. The other three people working for the business are self-employed training consultants. One of these consultants is employed part time to help learners develop key skills and work towards a national vocational qualification (NVQ) in customer service. The two other consultants are on fixed-term contracts and help the company on its business side.

2. The economy in Sussex remains buoyant. Current economic growth is 2 per cent per annum compared with the national average of 1.5 per cent. The growth is particularly strong in the north of the county, where Gatwick Airport and Crawley are situated. Gatwick airport continues to generate new economic activity. Sussex also has a substantial number of high technology businesses, and new call-centre operations are being established. There are proportionately fewer employees in manufacturing industries and more employees in health, financial services and air transport than in the rest of the UK. A greater proportion of the workforce is employed in high technology industries (4.8 per cent) compared with the average nationally (4 per cent).

3. In 1999, 78.4 per cent of the population of Sussex was economically active compared with a figure of 82.6 per cent for the Southeast as a whole. At the time of the original inspection, the unemployment rate for Sussex was 3.1 per cent, ranging from 1.3 per cent in western central Sussex to 6.5 per cent in Brighton. At the time of the reinspection, the unemployment rates in East Sussex and West Sussex were 2.2 per cent and 1 per cent, respectively, compared with the national rate of 2.9 per cent. Of the 50,000 businesses in Sussex, 86 per cent employed less than 10 people but they accounted for only 24 per cent of jobs. In contrast the largest businesses, employing more than 100 people, accounted for 1.4 per cent of

businesses but 39 per cent of jobs. Nineteen per cent of the workforce was self-employed compared with national average of 13 per cent. Fifty-one per cent of those in employment were men, 49 per cent women. At the 1991 census, minority ethnic groups comprised 1.9 per cent of the population of West Sussex compared with an average of 5.5 per cent for Great Britain as a whole. At the time of the reinspection, the proportions of people from minority ethnic groups in the populations of East Sussex and West Sussex were 1.3 per cent and 2 per cent, respectively, compared with the proportion in the population of the country as a whole, of 6.2 per cent.

4. At the time of the original inspection, 43 per cent of the workforce held level 3 qualifications and the number gaining vocational qualifications was rising. In 1999, the percentage of school leavers achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C and above was 53.7 per cent in West Sussex and 49.6 per cent in East Sussex compared with a national average of 47.9 per cent. In 2001, the proportions of school leavers in West Sussex and East Sussex who achieved five or more GCSEs at grade C or above were 55 per cent and 50 per cent, respectively, compared with the national average of 47.9 per cent.

## INSPECTION FINDINGS

5. One of the directors of Apex Management Consultants Limited drew up a self-assessment report for the TEC in September 1998, before the first learners had started on their modern apprenticeship programme. The second report, dated September 1999, was produced as part of the TEC's annual quality assurance cycle. When the company knew that an inspection was imminent, the second self-assessment report was updated and several parts re-written. The final draft of the report was seen and commented on by one of the company's internal verifiers before being submitted to the TEC and the TSC. The report provides a fair amount of background information on the company and its training activities. It identifies strengths and weaknesses and states clearly where supporting evidence can be found. The weaknesses identified are currently being addressed through an action plan. Inspectors agreed with some of the strengths and most of the weaknesses. They considered a number of strengths to be no more than normal practice. Prior to the reinspection, the company carried out further self-assessment and updated its second self-assessment report in November 2001.

6. The original inspection was carried out by a team of three inspectors and one occupational expert, who spent a total of 12 days at the company in July 2000. Inspectors visited the premises of seven of the 12 employers involved in training. They held interviews with eight employers, 11 learners and two of Apex's staff. They also examined a broad range of written material, including learners' portfolios, review records, files and external verifiers' reports.

7. The reinspection was carried out by a team of two inspectors, who spent a total of six days at Apex Management Consultants Limited in December 2001. Inspectors visited four employers and held interviews with four employers and eight learners. They interviewed three of the company's staff. Inspectors examined a range of written material, including internal and external verifiers' reports, policies and procedures, employers' records, feedback from learners and employers, minutes of meetings and data analysis.

## OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

### Management & professional

### Grade 3

8. The company offers modern apprenticeship programmes in insurance. At present, it has 36 trainees, all of whom are full-time employees of small or large organisations offering life pensions and general insurance products. Trainees' jobs are primarily focused on customer service and administration and they follow the customer service strand of the modern apprenticeship framework. The programme comprises the customer service NVQs at level 3, three units of the insurance NVQ at level 3, key skills units and an insurance professional qualification. The professional qualification is either the insurance foundation certificate part 1 or 2,

or the financial-planning certificate, parts 1 and 2. Part 3 of the financial-planning certificate is available as an additional course. Training is provided through individual and group sessions at the workplace. Employers release the trainees for occasional day workshops at the company's office. The two directors of Apex work with the self-employed training consultants. All staff have appropriate occupational qualifications, industrial experience and assessor awards. The trainer/assessor visits the trainees every month to cover the theoretical training and to monitor progress with NVQs and key skills. Two trainees have completed the full individual training plan out of the 50 who have started since January 1999. Thirty have achieved the NVQ in customer service, two have achieved units in the insurance NVQ, 17 have gained part 1 of the foundation or financial-planning certificate and 10 have gained part 2. Thirty-six trainees remain on programme. The self-assessment report identified nine strengths and five weaknesses. Seven of the strengths were no more than normal practice, while another strength and some weaknesses related more to generic areas of provision. Inspectors identified other strengths and weaknesses and awarded a lower grade than that given in the self-assessment report.

### STRENGTHS

- ◆ the company's excellent rapport with trainees and employers
- ◆ wide range of assessment methods
- ◆ good resources and opportunities for learning
- ◆ good off-the-job training

### WEAKNESSES

- ◆ lack of detail in trainees' action plans
- ◆ trainees' lack of access to their portfolios
- ◆ poor presentation of some work in portfolios

#### GOOD PRACTICE

*One trainee identified the need to develop improved procedures for communication between the independent financial advisers associated with the company. Work on the procedures formed the basis of a successful NVQ project and the company's implementation of the recommendations led to cost savings and improved efficiency.*

9. Apex works closely with a relatively small group of companies and has spent time building up excellent working relationships with them and the trainees they employ. The trainees are highly motivated. Employers offer them good opportunities to learn and to accumulate evidence for their NVQs. Trainees receive coaching on the job from work-based managers and quickly acquire new skills. Trainers from the company provide further training during their monthly visits. They hold group discussions, ask probing questions, observe trainees at work and carry out individual coaching. Assessors observe and question trainees and the outcomes are systematically recorded. Other evidence comes from witness testimonies and personal statements. Portfolios contain a wide range of evidence. Where the opportunity to demonstrate competence in a particular skill is inadequate, case studies have been introduced. Trainers/assessors offer assistance and guidance at any time through e-mail and telephone. Employers and trainees recognise and appreciate this support and trainees gain in confidence.

10. Trainees have clear career goals and see the training as the means of achieving



them. Their jobs enable them to practise their skills and generate evidence for their qualifications. Resources include good open-learning packs and computer-based material. Employers recognise the value of developing their employees' knowledge and skills and the benefits training brings to their business.

11. In addition to the training provided in the workplace, the company offers revision workshops to help trainees with their final preparations for insurance examinations. Since the workshops have been introduced there has been a significant improvement in achievement rates.

#### **GOOD PRACTICE**

*One employer with a large group of trainees has appointed one of the trainees as a co-ordinator. The co-ordinator provides a point of contact which helps the employer to keep in touch with the trainees. The role of co-ordinator has also helped the trainee concerned to develop communications and organisational skills and to accumulate evidence for key skills units.*

12. Trainees are unclear about the progress they are making towards their NVQs. Milestones are recorded on an assessment plan drawn up at the beginning of the programme. However, action plans drawn up after the monthly assessments are not detailed enough to provide the trainee with an explicit account of the progress made and the targets yet to be achieved. Action plans are set out on a single page with boxes which trainees found inadequate in size for the amount of detail that needed to be recorded.

13. Trainees' portfolios are stored in the company's office which means that trainees do not have access to them on a continuous basis. This prevents them from building up their evidence in a regular and constructive manner and lessens their feelings of responsibility for a key element of their training.

14. Some portfolios proved difficult to inspect because the content was arranged so haphazardly. All evidence is grouped together, rather than filed in a chronological sequence. Portfolios have no contents page and there are no sample signatures of assessors, internal verifiers or workplace managers to assure the authenticity of the evidence.

## **GENERIC AREAS**

### **Equal opportunities**

### **Grade 3**

15. Responsibility for equal opportunities rests with one of the directors of Apex Management Consultants Limited. At the time of the original inspection, the company had a short equal opportunities statement, which met the contract requirement of the local TEC. At the time of the reinspection, Apex had a detailed equal opportunities policy that reflects current legislation. All learners and employers now receive a copy of this policy. At the time of the original inspection, no learner was from a minority ethnic group, no learner was disabled and 71 per cent of learners were women. At the time of the reinspection, there were still no learners from a minority ethnic group but two learners had declared themselves to be disabled. Seventy per cent of learners are women. The company occupies the ground floor of a two-storey building, which is accessible to those with restricted mobility.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

*After reading the Apex equal opportunities policy, one employer realised that the company's own policy needed to be improved. The company is using the Apex policy as a model. Another company has used the Apex policy as an exemplar when writing its own equal opportunities policy.*

At the original inspection, the main weaknesses identified were:

- ◆ inadequate equal opportunities policy
- ◆ trainees and employers' poor understanding of equal opportunities
- ◆ inadequate analysis of data relating to equality of opportunity

16. Following the original inspection, a detailed action plan was written and implemented. Progress towards the full implementation of the plan was carried out on a quarterly basis. The weaknesses identified during the original inspection have been rectified. The good understanding which learners and employers have of equal opportunities, and the effective analysis of data, now constitute strengths. Data are now analysed twice a year. Since it was written, the equal opportunities policy has been reviewed regularly and was last revised in February 2001. All learners and employers were briefed about the revised policy and were given copies of it. The policy is clearly worded and gives examples of how equal opportunities should be promoted and upheld through all aspects of training and assessment, learning materials, resources and facilities. Inspectors mainly agreed with the judgements in the updated self-assessment report. They awarded the same grade as that given by the company.

**STRENGTHS**

- ◆ good understanding of equal opportunities among staff, learners and employers
- ◆ clear appeals and complaints procedures
- ◆ detailed analysis of data relating to equality of opportunity

**WEAKNESSES**

- ◆ insufficient monitoring of employers' promotion of equal opportunities
- ◆ few or no learners from some under-represented groups

17. As the self-assessment report acknowledged, staff, learners and employers now have a good understanding of equal opportunities and of how the equal opportunities policy relates to them. During learners' induction and progress reviews, staff make every effort to ensure that learners and employers maintain a good understanding of equal opportunities. Learners are asked to answer a well-written questionnaire which checks their understanding of equal opportunities, and of whom they should contact, should they encounter discrimination and harassment. Learners' responses to this questionnaire are collated and analysed. Learners whose responses indicate gaps in their understanding of equal opportunities, are given help and advice when staff next visit them. The owner of the company has attended training on equal opportunities and has passed information learned from this on to staff. All staff have access to a recently purchased CD-ROM about equal opportunities. Equality of opportunity is discussed at all staff meetings. Among the topics and issues discussed are targets and action plans for promoting equal opportunities, marketing to groups under-represented on programmes, and the revised equal opportunities policy.

18. The company's appeals and complaints procedures are clear. Staff explain these thoroughly to learners during their induction and discuss them with subsequently learners when they carry out their progress reviews and plan their assessments. Learners are required to sign a document to acknowledge their understanding of the appeals process. The document provides information on whom to contact should they experience any difficulties or have cause to complain about their training programme. Learners are aware of their right to appeal against assessment decisions and of who will deal with any complaints they may have. Complaints from learners are taken seriously and responded to very quickly.

19. The company collects data on learners' gender, ethnicity, disabilities and age at the start of the programme. They also collect these data in respect of those learners who achieve their target qualifications and complete a modern apprenticeship framework. The data are now analysed systematically and in considerable depth twice a year, to provide information used for planning, decision-making and marketing. Through careful analysis of these data, the company has identified three categories of learners who are under-represented on programmes or at risk of failing to achieve their qualifications. Staff use the findings of this analysis when setting targets in individual learning plans, and when giving learners support to help them succeed.

20. Fourteen of the 22 employers currently do not have their own equal opportunities policy. Staff have held discussions with employers on the company's equal opportunities policy. They have recorded details of such discussions in employers' files. There is, however, no requirement for employers to observe Apex's policy on equal opportunities if they have no policy of their own. Where companies have their own equal opportunities policy, copies of these are held by Apex. Staff do not systematically monitor employers' promotion of equal opportunities when they visit learners in the workplace. All learners are already employed when they start their training programme. Staff from Apex do not check that equal opportunities are upheld through the employers' recruitment and selection processes.

21. Apex has targets for the recruitment of learners with disabilities, from minority ethnic groups and in the 16 to 18 age range. This year, the company has met its recruitment target for learners with disabilities. As the company acknowledged in its updated self-assessment report in 2001-02, it failed to recruit any learners from minority ethnic groups, or any learners aged 16 to 18. Most learners are female. In the last three years, the proportions of female learners on programmes have been 67 per cent, 71 per cent and 65 per cent, respectively. The company does not produce promotional materials designed for a wide audience, including minority groups. The company, however, has taken some action to recruit from groups under-represented on programmes and widen participation, by sending letters to employers, the careers service and the appropriate professional organisation. The majority of learners starting programmes are women, this proportion being 67 per cent in 1998-99, 71 per cent in 1999-2000 and dropping slightly to 65 per cent in 2000-01. The company produces no promotional materials to make its training

provision known to a wider audience. Whilst there has been some attempt to target under-represented groups and widen participation in training, through sending letters to employers, the Careers Service and the Chartered Insurance Institute, this has not yet resulted in more diverse learner participation.

## **Trainee support**

## **Grade 3**

22. Most trainees are referred to the company by their employers or recruited as a result of Apex approaching employers to offer training to suitable employees. There are no specific selection criteria other than that applicants are already employed in the sector and fall within the age range required for a modern apprenticeship. Trainees receive a short induction from Apex staff which includes an introduction to the key requirements of the training programme, an overview of the modern apprenticeship framework, the requirements relating to the examined part of the training, the review process, health and safety and equal opportunities. The induction is usually held at the trainee's workplace and conducted with individuals or small groups. Sometimes, the employer joins the sessions. The trainees are also given an explanation of the progression routes they can follow. The company invites trainees to complete a short questionnaire designed to assess their preferred methods of learning and another to assess skills and the suitability of their work in creating evidence for the NVQ. Trainers visit trainees in the workplace to review progress and to provide additional training in theory. The self-assessment report identified two strengths and two weaknesses for this generic area. Inspectors agreed with the weaknesses identified but did not agree with the strengths. They identified additional strengths and awarded the same grade as the company.

### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ good additional training and revision workshops
- ◆ strong pastoral support

### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ inadequate individual training plans
- ◆ little accreditation of prior learning

23. The company offers regular additional training and revision workshops which focus clearly on examination requirements for the financial-planning certificate. Well-qualified, experienced insurance professionals who are very familiar with the requirements of the examination and the demands of the industry staff the workshops. Workshop sessions cover each aspect of the examination in a manageable format. The workshops are designed to build on work which trainees have undertaken, and trainees are required to read up on the planned topics for the training session. The company provides all trainees with good specialist reading material to support their studies and they are offered several opportunities to

practise for the exam by working on past examination papers. Practise papers are marked and trainees receive detailed feedback and guidance. Individual trainees receive additional support, where this is required.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

*Many employers offer a significant financial reward to the trainee for successful completion of the exam-based aspects of training.*

24. Trainees receive good personal and professional support from the small team of trainers. Help is sometimes provided outside normal office hours and at locations away from the company's premises or the workplace. Trainees are encouraged to take additional qualifications over and above the requirements of the modern apprenticeship framework. For example, one trainee followed a presentation-software course and others are working towards a financial-planning certificate level 3, a full level 3 insurance NVQ, or other professional qualifications.

25. At the start of their training, all trainees complete their own assessment of their skills and knowledge. In addition, they respond to a recently introduced questionnaire on their preferred methods of learning. The results of these initial assessments, however, are not always reflected in trainee's individual training plans. There is no initial assessment of trainees' occupational skills or key skills, but trainees who enter training having successfully achieved key skills units, for example, as part of a GNVQ, receive appropriate accreditation against relevant aspects of the modern apprenticeship framework. There is no other formal accreditation of prior learning. Many trainees already have a number of general certificates of education advanced levels (A levels) or other qualifications, but these are not used as indicators of their likely pace of progress or their ability to achieve higher level qualifications when initial training plans are drawn up. Records of progress reviews do not contain information on pastoral and work experience matters. Apex records personal information on a separate system to ensure that confidentiality is maintained. Apex has recently reviewed and revised the documents used in the review process. The original individual training plan is not regarded as a working document, so the company has generated substitute paperwork to meet the same needs. There are missed opportunities to use progress reviews to urge and encourage trainees to achieve key skills qualifications, as well as occupational qualifications, within a timescale that reflects their ability.

## Management of training

## Grade 3

26. The two directors who own the company run Apex Management Consultants Limited. The company is based in a single large office which is also used as a training room. The company employs no staff but they have links with three self-employed consultants from whom they purchase training, assessment and internal verification services. This is the second year Apex has contracted with the TEC to offer modern apprenticeships in insurance. Targets set by the TEC for recruitment and NVQ achievements are being met. There is no staff appraisal system, but there are written job descriptions for each of the directors and for the consultants. The directors and the consultants are well qualified and experienced. The strengths identified in the self-assessment report were more applicable to the occupational

area. Inspectors agreed with the identified weaknesses, which were already being addressed by the company before the inspection took place. Inspectors identified further strengths and weaknesses and awarded the same grade as that given by the company.

#### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ good internal communication
- ◆ detailed staff development plans
- ◆ good co-operation with employers in planning individual training

#### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ lack of on- and off-the-job co-ordination
- ◆ heavy dependence on guidance from external bodies

27. Apex is a small company employing staff on a consultancy basis to carry out certain training, assessment and internal verification tasks. The team has complementary skills and members work well together. They inform each other of developments and feel no inhibition about suggesting changes and improvements to the training. They communicate on an informal basis, mainly by telephone. However, the company has recognised the need for more formal communication and is moving to a system in which there are regular scheduled meetings and minutes which are subsequently circulated. The developments include internal verifiers' meetings and separate assessors' meetings. Although the company is small, staff development plans are drawn up for each of the full-time members of staff and the consultants. The plans indicate in detail how training will take place and what additional help is needed to achieve the targets set. Plans are considered at each staff meeting and amended where necessary.

28. The company has a good informal relationship with employers. In most cases, there is more than one trainee with each employer. The consultants do not work on regular days but arrange their inputs to meet the needs of the trainees and the employers. For example, when it suits the employer, all trainees are trained as a group at the employer's premises and, at other times, the trainees visit the company's office for individual or group training. The company has produced a consultation paper on improving employers' involvement in training. It has been circulated to the TEC, which has commented on the proposals. Action points put forward in the paper are now being implemented, on a trial basis, with two employers. Part of the purpose of these is to achieve greater co-ordination of on- and off-the-job training.

29. At present, there is no co-ordination between the company and the employers to ensure that activities on the job provide the training required to enable trainees to achieve the NVQ. The employer is not given a copy of the training schedule and does not know when certain topics are being covered. Reviews take place regularly, and employers and managers know the programme the trainee is undertaking, but at no time do the trainer/assessor, trainee and workplace manager

sit down together to share experiences and plan ahead. The employer receives a copy of the review sheet, but not of the action plan. The need for closer integration of on- and off-the-job training has been recognised and things are changing for new trainees. One company, which has recently taken on three new trainees, has been provided with a detailed list of topics to be covered at each training session, and a named person has been appointed as co-ordinator to strengthen links between on- and off- the-job training.

30. Trainers are experienced in, and knowledgeable about, all aspects of the training. Until recently, the company had not placed enough emphasis on developing effective procedures to underpin the training. Apex has responded quickly to suggestions made by the external verifier and the TEC and has accepted recommendations from the TEC, following recent health and safety and financial audits. Until September last year, there were no formal internal verification records. The company has now produced an internal verification strategy and guidance for assessors to ensure that assessors and internal verifiers are more accountable.

## **Quality assurance**

## **Grade 2**

31. One of the directors has overall responsibility for quality assurance. Quality assurance arrangements cover all aspects of training and assessment. The company has a written policy on internal verification which meets awarding body requirements. Staff visit learners and employers in the workplace at least once every three weeks. Records of these meetings and of telephone conversations with learners and employers are held in the company office.

At the original inspection, the main weaknesses identified were:

- ◆ no quality assurance framework
- ◆ lack of formal procedures

32. Following the original inspection, the company drew up a plan for developing effective arrangements for quality assurance, and implementation of this has been reviewed every quarter. All weaknesses in quality assurance which were identified during the original inspection have been rectified. The director responsible for quality assurance reviewed the company's quality assurance procedures. Working with an external consultant, staff have revised and improved the company's quality assurance system. The company now has comprehensive and effective quality assurance procedures which cover key aspects of training and assessment. Staff are clear about their individual roles and responsibilities for quality assurance. A procedure for quarterly internal audits has been introduced and this aims to ensure that staff are implementing the quality assurance system correctly. There are regular meetings of assessors at which good practice is shared and action is planned to implement recommendations made in the external verifiers' reports. The self-assessment report drawn up before the original inspection was

insufficiently critical. The revised self-assessment report is exceptionally thorough and detailed. Inspectors agreed with the judgements and the grade in the revised self-assessment report.

### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ clear and comprehensive quality assurance arrangements
- ◆ effective action to improve the quality of training
- ◆ effective action on comprehensive feedback from learners and employers
- ◆ good use of data in planning continuous improvement
- ◆ good and effective action-planning

### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ little monitoring of employers' training
- ◆ no internal verification of assessments until the end of training programmes

33. The company now has a comprehensive and effective set of quality assurance procedures. Staff were fully involved in the design and implementation of these procedures. They are clear and concise and all staff understand and use them. Staff have drawn up a calendar which indicates when quality assurance reviews of training, leadership and management should take place. Through internal audit. The company has identified ways of improving the learners' experience. Learners' progress reviews and checks on employers' observance of health and safety regulations are carried out on time. Following audit activities, ways of improving the quality assurance system are identified and acted on. The company's office and filing systems have been reorganised completely and it is now easy to locate information about individual learners and employers.

34. Staff are keen to improve the quality of training and they do all they can to help individual learners fulfil their potential. They respond quickly and positively to ideas and suggestions that benefit learners and help the company run more smoothly. Training sessions are observed and evaluated. Staff have established clear criteria for the evaluation of training sessions. Trainers who are observed welcome the feedback on their performance. Staff meetings now take place regularly. They have a well-structured agenda and are minuted. Staff share good practice at these meetings.

35. The company has developed comprehensive questionnaires to collect feedback from learners and employers. These cover all elements of the programme and pastoral support. Learners are asked to respond to questionnaires at the end of their induction, nine months into their training, and when they leave the programme. The questionnaires are well designed and learners have ample space to provide full answers to each question. Many learners respond to the questionnaires and their responses contain valuable detail. Staff act on learners' suggestions. Findings from the original inspection show that, in response to learners' suggestions, modifications were made to off-the-job training sessions and the progress review



process, and staff provided notes to complement the textbook being used. Employers grade the level of service provided by Apex and give written comments on all aspects of the modern apprenticeship programme. Learners and employers are well satisfied with the company's services. Their suggestions for improvement, where appropriate, are acted upon promptly. Since the original inspection, the induction process has been improved, the frequency with which progress reviews are carried out has been increased and employers are now more closely involved in the reviews. During their progress reviews, learners carry out action-planning more effectively. They are now clear about what they have achieved and what they need to do before the next visit from their assessor.

36. Learners' achievement and retention rates, the responses of learners and employers to questionnaires, and learners' reasons for leaving programmes early are analysed thoroughly and taken into consideration when making changes to programmes. Following the introduction of mock examinations, learners' achievement rates have improved.

37. Following the original inspection, the company drew up a post-inspection action plan to rectify weaknesses. This plan was detailed. It specified clear actions to be carried out, the timescales within which they had to be achieved and where responsibility lay for the implementation of action. The action plan is still being carried out successfully. Monitoring of its implementation takes place on a quarterly basis. Broad actions have been broken down into achievable milestones. Progress in implementing the action plan is discussed at team meetings. Staff are enthusiastic about the progress made in improving the company's work and services. Some aspects of provision which were found to be weaknesses at the time of the original inspection, are now strengths.

38. Staff from Apex have regular and informal meetings with learners and employers in the workplace to discuss what happens there. The quality assurance process, however, does not cover these meetings and their effectiveness is not evaluated systematically. Learners take part in an induction programme provided by their employer, and they receive mentoring and off-the-job training. Staff from Apex, however, do not monitor the quality of these activities.

39. Internal verification of assessment is not carried out on a continuous basis. Internal verification usually takes place towards the end of learners' programmes when learners have completed their work for their NVQ, or key skills certification. Some learners, such as those working towards an NVQ in customer service for which the requisite standards have been changed, have not had their assessments internally verified under the old standards.