

# INSPECTION REPORT

## Touchstone Learning and Skills Ltd

15 September 2006



ADULT LEARNING  
INSPECTORATE



**Estyn**

Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi Dros Addysg  
A Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru  
Her Majesty's Inspectorate  
For Education and Training in Wales

## 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 learning within the remit of a single inspectorate. The ALI is responsible for inspecting a wide range of government-funded learning, including:

- work-based learning for all people aged over 16
- provision in further education colleges for people aged 19 and over
- **learnirect** provision
- Adult and Community Learning
- training funded by Jobcentre Plus
- education and training in prisons, at the invitation of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons
- adult information, advice and guidance services (**nextstep**).

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.

## Pre-inspection analysis

The resources allocated to a cycle 2 inspection are primarily determined by the findings from the previous inspection. Account is also taken of information about achievement and retention obtained from the funding body, and any significant changes in the size or scope of the provision.

Where a provider has received good grades in cycle 1, the cycle 2 inspection is relatively light. If the provider offers a number of areas of learning, a restricted sample is inspected.

Where a provider has received satisfactory grades in cycle 1, the cycle 2 inspection is less intensive and it is possible that not all areas of learning are included.

Where there are significant unsatisfactory grades from cycle 1, the intensity of the cycle 2 inspection is broadly the same as cycle 1, and all significant areas of learning are inspected.

Providers that have not previously been inspected will receive a full inspection.

## Overall effectiveness

The grades given for areas of learning and leadership and management will be used to arrive at a judgement about the overall effectiveness of the provider.

An **outstanding** provider should typically have leadership and management and at least half of the areas of learning judged to be a grade 1. All area of learning grades will be graded 1 or 2.

A **good** provider should have leadership and management and at least half of the area of learning grades judged to be a grade 2 or better. A good training provider should not have any grade 4s, and few grade 3s in the areas of learning.

A **satisfactory** provider should have adequate or better grades in leadership and management and in at least two thirds of the area of learning grades. An adequate provider might have a range of grades across areas of learning, some of which might be graded 4.

Provision will normally be deemed to be **inadequate** where more than one third of the area of learning grades and/or leadership and management are judged to be inadequate.

The final decision as to whether the provision is inadequate rests with the Chief Inspector of Adult Learning.

## Grading

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about the quality of provision in occupational/curriculum areas and Jobcentre Plus programmes, as well as to summarise their judgements about the quality of learning sessions. The same scale is used to describe the quality of leadership and management, which includes equality of opportunity and quality assurance. The descriptors for the four grades are:

- *grade 1 - outstanding*
- *grade 2 - good*
- *grade 3 - satisfactory*
- *grade 4 - inadequate*

# INSPECTION REPORT

## Touchstone Learning and Skills Ltd

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## INSPECTION REPORT

### DESCRIPTION OF THE PROVIDER

1. Touchstone Learning and Skills Ltd (Touchstone) is now part of VT Group which includes VT Plus Training, HCTC and Touchstone. It has a head office in Southport and two regional offices across England. The acquisition by the VT Group has now enabled Touchstone to access a substantial number of additional offices throughout the country for meetings, training and 'hot desking'.
2. Touchstone offers work-based learning for young people and a very small number of employer-based training for adults. Currently 1,784 learners are on government-funded programmes in retailing and customer service, and 190 are working towards qualifications in business administration.
3. Touchstone is one of the largest providers of apprenticeships in the retail industry. At the time of the inspection there are 1,984 learners on government-funded training programmes. Touchstone currently contracts with 33 local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) and the Welsh Assembly Government. They have agreements with approximately 50 national retailers to exclusively deliver the training to employees who are under the age of 25. In addition to these large clients, Touchstone also delivers qualifications for employees in small and medium-sized companies.
4. Touchstone has four regions. Each region has an area manager who manages internal verifiers and team leaders, who between them are responsible for managing the contract. The company has 86 training officers and approximately 50 administrative, sales and customer service staff, most of whom are based at its head office.
5. Since February 2005, Touchstone has been given the lead in the Sussex LSC area to form a retail Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) in conjunction with a number of local colleges. In October 2005, Touchstone also became the lead in a Northwest CoVE covering Manchester, Lancashire, Cumbria, Halton and Cheshire and Warrington.

### OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS

**Grade 2**

6. **The overall effectiveness of the provision is good.** Leadership and management are good, as is quality improvement. Equality of opportunity is satisfactory. Provision in business administration and in retail and commercial enterprise are also good.
7. **The inspection team had some confidence in the reliability of the self-assessment process.** The self-assessment process is inclusive. All staff were involved through the company's self-assessment days, when staff commented on and contributed to the draft report. The report is detailed and accurately identifies many of the strengths and weaknesses, but it is insufficiently judgemental and is not always based on evidence. The company's grades in the self assessment report matched those given by inspectors.
8. **The provider has demonstrated that it is in a good position to make improvements.** Touchstone's staff have a good understanding of the organisation's overall purpose and

business objectives. There is active encouragement of change for improvement, particularly through the internal verification system. Individual staff have targets for framework success. Touchstone has been improving overall success rates at a faster rate than providers in general.

## KEY CHALLENGES FOR TOUCHSTONE LEARNING AND SKILLS LTD:

- better long-term planning for learners' development and progress, including co-ordination of additional learning support
- continue to improve success rates, in particular for retail advanced apprentices
- continue to develop learning sessions to improve delivery and provide learning in context
- use data more effectively to provide a strategic overview of improvement
- continue to improve the understanding of equality of opportunity for staff, learners and employers
- target under-represented groups in recruitment

## GRADES

grade 1 = outstanding, grade 2 = good, grade 3 = satisfactory, grade 4 = inadequate

Grades awarded at inspection

<b>Leadership and management</b>		<b>2</b>
Contributory grades:		
Equality of opportunity		3
Quality improvement		2

<b>Retail and commercial enterprise</b>			<b>2</b>
<b>Contributory areas:</b>	<b>Number of learners</b>	<b>Contributory grade</b>	
<b>Retailing and wholesaling</b> Apprenticeships for young people	977	2	
<b>Warehousing and distribution</b> Apprenticeships for young people	60	2	

<b>Business administration and law</b>			<b>2</b>
<b>Contributory areas:</b>	<b>Number of learners</b>	<b>Contributory grade</b>	
<b>Administration</b> Apprenticeships for young people	162	2	
<b>Business management</b> Apprenticeships for young people	28	2	
<b>Customer service</b> Apprenticeships for young people	757	2	

## ABOUT THE INSPECTION

9. The inspection reported on and graded retail and commercial enterprise and business administration and law. Learners in retail and commercial enterprise were enrolled exclusively within retail training programmes. Learners in business administration and law were substantially enrolled on customer service programmes, but also administration, management and team leading.

Number of inspectors	10
Number of inspection days	90
Number of learners interviewed	167
Number of staff interviewed	99
Number of employers interviewed	72
Number of locations/sites/learning centres visited	142
Number of visits	3

### Leadership and Management

#### Strengths

- good use of data and information to manage the business
- very effective strategies to improve learners' success rates
- good employer engagement
- good professional development and support for staff
- very effective systems and process to bring about improvement to the learning process
- some good individual initiatives to support learners with additional needs

#### Weaknesses

- insufficient use of evaluation to plan for improvement
- insufficient co-ordination of equality and diversity initiatives
- inadequate targeting of under-represented groups in recruitment

### Retail and commercial enterprise

#### *Strengths*

- good development of skills
- particularly effective employer involvement
- good short-term action-planning
- good management of retail programmes

#### *Weaknesses*

- poor success rates for advanced apprentices

- insufficient planning of individual learning

### **Business administration and law**

#### *Strengths*

- good achievement
- good development of work-related skills and confidence in customer service
- good employer involvement
- good response to learning and assessment needs

#### *Weaknesses*

- insufficient planning of individual learning programmes
- incomplete initial advice and guidance for learners working for specialist employers



## **WHAT LEARNERS LIKE ABOUT TOUCHSTONE LEARNING AND SKILLS LTD:**

- the flexibility - being able to do 'bits' when there is time
- support from assessor – 'she's brilliant'
- getting the qualification
- 'it has helped with my self-discipline, with managing my workload'
- 'think it's fantastic – gives you that step up'
- 'I've really enjoyed it, I've learnt a lot and it's increased my confidence in my abilities'
- 'the assignments – they made me do research and were a good preparation for the tests'
- 'now I know what I'm capable of'
- 'Touchstone has made me better at maths'
- 'a brilliant qualification because I didn't do well at school'
- doing the case studies and answering the knowledge questions
- '10 out of 10 for Touchstone'
- 'not just a job, - it's now a role since doing the qualification'
- training officer - very helpful, friendly and supportive

## **WHAT LEARNERS THINK TOUCHSTONE LEARNING AND SKILLS LTD COULD IMPROVE:**

- 'it was based on my knowledge and I thought I was going to learn more'
- clearer assignment questions - difficult to know what they want
- more frequent visits
- fewer changes in training officer as it disrupts the programme
- less repetitive paperwork - many different booklets in the assessment, all covering the same ground, such as discrimination
- some wording is difficult

## DETAILED INSPECTION FINDINGS

### LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

**Grade 2**

#### Strengths

- good use of data and information to manage the business
- very effective strategies to improve learners' success rates
- good employer engagement
- good professional development and support for staff
- very effective systems and process to bring about improvement to the learning process
- some good individual initiatives to support learners with additional needs

#### Weaknesses

- insufficient use of evaluation to plan for improvement
- insufficient co-ordination of equality and diversity initiatives
- inadequate targeting of under-represented groups in recruitment

10. Touchstone is a national company, managed as four regions. The managing director and the senior management team, comprising the operations and finance executive, projects manager, marketing manager and quality manager, are based in Southport. The central services include a business development unit which is responsible for recruiting learners and employers, a customer services team which is in regular contact with employers, a marketing team, human resources, and a central unit for management information. Each of the four regional teams is led by an area manager and includes internal verifiers, team leaders and training officers. The area managers in the southern and the northern regions each have line management responsibility for a CoVE manager. The management structure of Touchstone has been completely revised since the previous inspection. At the time of inspection, Touchstone is in the process of integrating into VT Group and managers are changing roles and line management responsibilities.

11. Managers use data and information well to manage the business. The management information system has been developed by Touchstone and a national software house to meet the needs of the company. Data is updated regularly and the contract manager produces a range of reports which are used to manage the business and to monitor performance. Company performance is discussed at monthly management meetings when area managers meet with the operations manager, the quality manager and other head office staff. The information is shared at area level with team leaders, is used as a basis for discussion with staff and also used as an indicator of the company's success. Reports are sent regularly to employers to inform them of the success and progress of their learners. The company sets overall success targets and uses key performance indicators to drive forward improvements and to monitor improvements. However, some targets are insufficiently focused. For example, there are no differentiated targets for the success rates of apprentices and advanced apprentices, or for the different frameworks which Touchstone offers, or for the different regions.

12. There are very effective strategies to improve success rates. Since the previous inspection the company has reviewed and revised its strategy for delivering learning and for supporting learners, and success rates have increased. The average length of time that learners take to complete their frameworks has also reduced. The actions include an increased focus on individual learners, including target-setting and monitoring of progress, improved recruitment of learners and the introduction of structured learning for apprentices, and production of learning materials. A member of the business development unit at head office speaks to all potential learners and explains the apprenticeship programme and the support offered by Touchstone. All learners have a structured initial assessment and an informative induction using a well-written induction handbook. A traffic light system has been introduced to identify and meet learner support needs and to focus support where it is most needed. This has been very effective. In 2004, staff turnover was high at 50 per cent. The company recognised the effect of changes in staff on learner retention and achievement and much work has now been carried out to reduce staff turnover. However, it remains at 30 per cent and many learners experience a change of training officer. The company has worked to minimise the effect of a change of staff by standardising systems and adjusting the caseload of team leaders, to enable them to support learners during the interim periods while new training officers are recruited.

13. Employer engagement is good. Touchstone works with a number of prestigious national employers as well as local small and medium-sized businesses. Employers are involved in the learning process, many have their own in-house training schemes and most participate in the learners' review processes. A detailed employer handbook states employers' role and responsibility for learning. The company effectively engages with employers in a number of ways. Head office staff are allocated to employers to ensure a point of contact for the employer and to build up a lasting and effective working relationship. The head of customer service makes regular visits to national employers to monitor the contracts. Business development unit staff regularly contact employers to identify potential learners and to ensure they are informed about apprenticeship frameworks. The customer service and marketing departments both send annual surveys to employers and make telephone contact to gauge employer satisfaction. Detailed progress reports on learners are sent regularly to employers to enable them to monitor performance and to allow them to compare their performance with the national average and against other companies. Touchstone has worked with a number of large employers to match their in-house training programmes to the national vocational qualification (NVQ) frameworks so that they may be used as evidence in portfolios.

14. The professional development and support for staff is good. Touchstone supports and develops its workforce well. There is a structured induction and staff development programme for all new staff to ensure that they are adequately trained and qualified for their role. The staff induction is much improved. It is now structured and is based on NVQ-style units and gives staff a good introduction to the company and their role. Eighty-five per cent of staff are qualified assessors and the remaining 15 per cent are either working towards the NVQ assessor A1 unit or are on their probationary period. Eighty per cent of staff have, or are working towards, their key skills qualifications. All staff have a period in industry to refresh their occupational skills. There is good team-work in the regions and in the internal verification team. Staff are well supported by their teams. New staff and those changing their job role benefit from coaching from more experienced staff and team leaders. Head office staff also support field staff by telephoning learners and

employers, by developing training materials and systems and matching employer training against the NVQ. Employment conditions and workloads have all been reviewed recently as part of a strategy to reduce the staff turnover. However, the current annual turnover is 31 per cent and the average stay in the organisation is still only 24 months.

15. Touchstone's managers have set a clear strategic direction for the company, which has been well communicated to staff. The integration into VT Group is being sensitively managed and a great deal of sharing of practice is taking place. Touchstone is adopting the VT Group policy of obtaining Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks for all training staff.

### **Equality of opportunity**

### **Contributory grade 3**

16. A number of training officers have taken part in good individual initiatives to help learners with additional learning needs, second language difficulties and disabilities. For example, some learners from European countries have had language help from a training officer in adapting the text of national standards to make them more understandable. Two training officers for each region have been nominated to train as additional needs specialists and have begun to provide support for other training officers. Touchstone now has access to a large number of specialist tutors for essential skills who are employed by the VT Group, and have started to refer learners who are in need of higher-intensity support programmes. Developments in this area are recent and it is too soon to judge the effectiveness of this additional provision. The learners with disabilities exceeds the targets for recruitment. Data is held on individual disability, but little systematic action is taken to identify overall support needs and it is left to training officers to access and develop additional learning support.

17. Touchstone maintains a satisfactory equal opportunities policy and code of practice, which are included in an operations manual that is made available to all staff. The policy and code of practice are carefully reviewed after changes in legislation and policies and procedures are updated. The code of practice gives clear advice on a wide range of aspects relating to equal opportunities. In addition, Touchstone has an informative equality and diversity manual that is also made available to all staff. It contains an equal opportunities strategy and a guide to equality and diversity that is useful in providing advice to learners and employers.

18. The marketing department of Touchstone carries out a series of helpful surveys to evaluate the effectiveness of training programmes and these include questions on equality. In a recent survey, Touchstone contacted several local racial equality councils to examine the local needs of minority ethnic groups in their areas. Touchstone marketing department has translated its website into several languages and is continuing to produce new promotional material in a number of languages. The department also produces several informative internal and external newsletters that often include articles on equality and diversity.

19. There are workbooks for the induction of learners and employers and these contain guidance on equality of opportunity. All learners receive a copy of a workbook, at their induction, which includes a series of tasks relating to equality which have to be completed during the induction. Learners also complete a further workbook on equality and diversity, with exercises timed for completion at stages up to nine months into their programme. Touchstone also provides a comprehensive induction booklet for employers,

which contains fundamental information on equality of opportunity. Training officers check employers' equal opportunities policies when learners start their training and regularly as part of the programme monitoring process.

20. Learners' and staff's understanding and awareness of equality and diversity vary. Some learners have a reasonable understanding of equal opportunities and speak confidently and knowledgeably about it, while others are less confident and have only a superficial awareness of the topic. Much of the information given to learners during the monitoring process is available from learning resources, but some training officers are less confident in dealing with this aspect to ensure proper understanding. Training officers work with questions and expected answers to monitor learners' understanding, but the response from learners is often poor and insufficient follow-up is made by the training officer to ensure understanding. However, staff are encouraged to develop their personal understanding of equality and diversity and are requested to bring items for information and discussion to meetings with colleagues and managers. Some professional training has taken place in recent months to update staff on their understanding and awareness of these issues.

21. Touchstone is not successful in recruiting learners from under-represented groups. Although, overall, the number of learners from minority ethnic groups reflects national percentages, a significant proportion are contained within a small number of London-based LSCs and a large national employer. However, Touchstone has clear targets for participation by gender, minority ethnic group and disability. The data on equality and diversity targets is collated by each individual LSC area and compared with actual data of participation. Areas of poor representation are highlighted as red or amber in management reports. Touchstone employs a very high proportion of female staff and does not sufficiently target male applicants to redress this imbalance and to provide role models for learners. Since the merger with the VT Group, Touchstone has started but not yet completed CRB checks for all relevant staff. With the opportunity to become involved in the wider VT Group activity, Touchstone has now become a member of a group-wide equal opportunities committee, and is able to take advantage of a wide range of training opportunities in equality and diversity. This involvement is very recent, however, and it is too soon to judge the effectiveness of this additional support.

22. At the time of the inspection, no senior member of staff was championing the concepts of equality and diversity. Touchstone delegates aspects of an equality and diversity action plan to a wide range of staff. After a period of time in which the company ran a combined equal opportunities and health and safety committee, these functions have now been delegated to local area management committees. One member of staff in Southport has responsibility for the administration of equality and diversity matters, for monitoring the progress of an equality and diversity action plan, and for links with the wider VT Group. This equality and diversity action plan has clearly identified development needs, actions, nominated responsibility and realistic timescales.

### **Quality improvement**

### **Contributory grade 2**

23. Touchstone has very effective systems to bring about improvement to the learning process. Managers and staff realise the importance of a quality experience for learners. Quality improvement is focused on improving the performance and the quality of the work of individual members of staff, and the improvement this brings to the learners' experience. The system is based on the extensive use of a traffic light system for staff and

learners. All staff are graded as red, amber or green on a regular basis, and Touchstone has developed a set of criteria which are used to ensure consistency in this process. Training officers are observed carrying out their key tasks including induction, progress reviews and learning sessions. Internal verifiers have been trained to observe learning sessions. The frequency of these observations is based on the training officers' grading. Staff categorised as green are monitored twice a year, while other staff are monitored more frequently. The feedback to training officers is supportive and constructive and brings about improvement, but observations are largely descriptive and observers do not comment on the technical content of the training. There is currently no quality assurance of on-the-job training delivered by employers.

24. Internal verification is well managed by the quality manager. Each of the regional teams includes internal verifiers who support the training officers. Internal verification is exceptionally well planned and the process is thorough. Internal verifiers have a key role in bringing about quality improvement, over and above their role of verifying and supporting the assessment process. They and the quality improvement manager and her team ensure that systems are followed. The internal verifiers carry out observations and quality assurance of other aspects of the training officers' work, including the delivery of learning sessions.

25. Good practice is identified formally through the quality improvement process and informally by members of staff. This is shared effectively within area teams, but the process for sharing good practice throughout the company is less effective. The complaints process is well publicised and well managed. The small number of complaints made annually are acted on promptly and effective action is taken. The management team receives an annual report, and changes in processes are often made after complaints.

26. There is insufficient use of evaluation and data to plan for improvement. The organisation collects and uses a great deal of information which is used to bring about improvement, but there is insufficient analysis of some of this information on a company-wide basis. There is no company overview, and the information is not used to bring about improvement in a strategic way. As identified at the previous inspection, the internal verifiers' evaluations of training are not analysed to improve training across the company. The marketing department carries out a number of evaluations including an annual employer evaluation, an early leaver evaluation and a training officer evaluation. These are discussed at management team meetings, but the information is not used in the self-assessment process. Each leaver is telephoned by customer services and the reasons for leaving are recorded, but there is no overall analysis of why learners leave, and the benefits of this time-consuming activity are not fully realised. A large number of observations of learning are carried out annually, but there is no analysis of the grades given to these sessions.

27. The quality improvement team, in conjunction with other staff drafted the most recent self-assessment report to identify Touchstone's strengths and weaknesses. However, the self-assessment process is not an integral part of the quality improvement system. There are no judgements related to teaching, learning and training or achievement.

## AREAS OF LEARNING

### Retail and commercial enterprise

### Grade 2

Contributory areas:	Number of learners	Contributory grade
<b>Retailing and wholesaling</b> Apprenticeships for young people	977	2
<b>Warehousing and distribution</b> Apprenticeships for young people	60	2

28. At the time of the inspection there are 1,037 learners on retail service programmes. There are 834 apprentices, of whom 776 are in retail operations and 58 are in distribution, warehousing and storage operations. There are 203 advanced apprentices, of whom 201 are in retail operations and two are in distribution, warehousing and storage operations. All learners are employed before joining the programme. The range of employment opportunities varies from major retail companies to small independent businesses. Many employers recommend the provider to other employers.

#### *Strengths*

- good development of skills
- particularly effective employer involvement
- good short-term action-planning
- good management of retail programmes

#### *Weaknesses*

- poor success rates for advanced apprentices
- insufficient planning of individual learning

### Achievement and standards

29. The development of vocational skills and learners' confidence is good. Learners gain good practical skills to improve their performance at work and their confidence increases significantly. For example, learners gain the ability to deal with difficult customer complaints. The standard of learners' work is satisfactory or better. Many learners complete the technical certificate in good time and gain distinctions. Approximately 10 per cent of learners progress from level 2 to level 3 qualifications and some gain promotion at work during their programme. Employers are very positive about the benefits of the training on their business and the individual learners' development. Learners are motivated and enjoy learning.

30. Over the past three years the provider has made significant improvements to timely completion of learners' programmes. Learners' progress is now satisfactory.

31. Most of the learners on retail programmes are apprentices. Success rates for apprentices are satisfactory and well above the national average of 35 per cent. Success

rates have improved and indications are that they will continue to improve for the most recent contract year. However, the success rate for advanced apprentices is poor, despite being 10 per cent above the very low national average of 22 per cent. Over the past two years, success rates have not risen above 35 per cent and the unconfirmed success rate data for 2005-06 indicates that advanced apprenticeship rates will not rise above this figure.

Programme	End Year	Success Rate	No, of learners	Provider NVQ Rate	National NVQ Rate	Provider framework rate	National framework rate
Advanced Apprenticeships	2003-04	overall	152	46	31	35	21
		timely	123	20	19	15	13
	2004-05	overall	195	30	31	25	22
		timely	199	21	22	18	15
Apprenticeships	2003-04	overall	887	63	45	55	32
		timely	816	32	24	28	18
	2004-05	overall	1066	54	45	51	35
		timely	1060	40	30	38	23
NVQ training for young	2003-04	overall	4	75	39	0	0
		timely	5	40	28	0	0
	2004-05	overall	1	100	50	0	0
		timely	0	0	0	0	0

For details of how to calculate overall and timely success rates please refer to the "Quality Improvement Pack" (available from the Learning and Skills Council's website: [www.lsc.gov.uk](http://www.lsc.gov.uk)).

### The quality of provision

32. The short-term action-planning for learners is good. Learners are visited in the workplace by training officers at least once a month and often more frequently. Short-term action-planning takes place at every visit. Learners are set realistic targets to agreed timescales which take into account individual needs and workplace requirements. Learners demonstrate a good understanding of what is to be achieved and how it relates to their qualification. These short-term action plans are reviewed at each visit and comprehensive feedback is given to the learner. Most learners report that they are challenged by the work and appreciate the availability of their assessor by mobile telephone or e-mail. The care and support for learners is satisfactory. Learners speak highly of the working relationship they have with their training officers and many state that they are making good progress or have achieved their framework because of the support provided.

33. Employer involvement is particularly effective. Employers are well briefed at the outset of the learners' programme and have sufficient understanding of the qualifications. This good communication continues throughout the learning programme. In-house training is matched to the NVQ in some cases. Employers take a full role during training officers' visits to the workplace. Many employers identify ways in which they can help learners make good progress, particularly by identifying meaningful key skills projects.



Where direct line managers are not able to play an active part in the learners' training, the provider ensures that mentors are assigned. Internal verification ensures that the employers' involvement and that workplace assessment opportunities are maximised. Employers are mostly very supportive, but a few are not sufficiently challenged by Touchstone's staff to engage fully with training plans.

34. Initial assessment is well planned. All learners complete a literacy and numeracy assessment, and many learners complete a further diagnostic assessment to highlight specific learning needs. All learners complete a vocational skills scan to identify NVQ optional units and employers are fully involved in this process. All learners complete a preferred learning styles questionnaire, but it is not sufficiently clear how the results of this are used to benefit the learner. Most learners are on a programme that is well suited to their personal and employment needs. Induction is thorough. Workbooks to support learners' understanding of health and safety and equality and diversity are interactive, and are used to form the basis of evidence for the technical certificate. Learners' understanding and practical application of health and safety is well developed. For example, many learners have changed their approach towards lifting heavy goods. Equality and diversity are reinforced throughout the programme, although learners' understanding is not always fully explored.

35. Assessment practice is satisfactory. Assessments are well planned in advance with learners and employers. They are clearly related and cross-referenced to all parts of the framework. Learners fully understand what is expected of them and are clear about the appeals process. Assessment progress is well recorded, but there is insufficient variety in the use of assessment methods. Information, advice and guidance to learners are satisfactory.

36. Training provided by Touchstone's staff is satisfactory. Many learners receive individual off-the-job training to support various aspects of the programme. There is a wide range of learning resources available. Work towards key skills and the technical certificate is started at beginning of the programme and is seen by learners as an integral part of qualification achievement. The introduction of online testing/external assessment of key skills and technical certificates is being introduced to speed up results and certification.

37. There is insufficient long-term planning of individual learning. Most individual learning plans have all constituent completion dates set for the end of the programme and most are not amended as the learner progresses through the programme. Previous learning or experience is not taken into account and target dates are not challenging. Individual learning plans do not include details of any additional learning support. Results from diagnostic tests are not clearly used to plan additional support. Two training officers for each area have completed qualifications to support these learners and there is additional specialist support available from VT Plus Training. However, many training officers do not have the knowledge to be able to target this support effectively. Where additional learning support is being provided, there is no integrated plan linking it with the other parts of the programme. A range of resources is available to support learning, but not all learners are given access and have to rely on existing knowledge. The effective use of resources was mentioned as in need of improvement at the previous inspection. Touchstone has recently introduced an online resource centre, but at the time of the inspection not all learners were aware of its availability.

## **Leadership and management**

38. All staff and learner performance is monitored closely with appropriate actions determined for improvement. However, targets for raising success rates are not always challenging. Working relationships between staff are well formed and very supportive. There is a clear management structure within the four regions. Procedures and systems are well developed and effectively used.

39. Internal verification is a key feature of managing the programme and is very thorough. Action-planning drives the improvement of each activity. This has been particularly successful in improving the planning of the assessment and review process. Team leaders support the process of quality improvement by monitoring other key aspects of the learners' experience.

40. Staff are well qualified and experienced and there are clear professional development requirements for new and existing staff. Staff training needs are systematically analysed and appropriate action plans are devised. Staff occupational competence is frequently updated within the industry using Touchstone's effective links with retail employers. However, the knowledge gained from staff training is not always fully utilised. For example, skills gained in coaching techniques and understanding of equality and diversity have not been uniformly dispersed.

41. The self-assessment process is inclusive and generally represents the findings of the inspection. However, there were no judgements on success rates or quality of teaching and learning in the self-assessment report.

**Business administration and law****Grade 2**

<b>Contributory areas:</b>	<b>Number of learners</b>	<b>Contributory grade</b>
<b>Administration</b> Apprenticeships for young people	162	2
<b>Business management</b> Apprenticeships for young people	28	2
<b>Customer service</b> Apprenticeships for young people	757	2

42. There are 947 learners in the business administration and law area of learning. Of the 757 following customer service qualifications, 445 are apprentices and 312 are advanced apprentices. In business administration there are 108 apprentices and 54 advanced apprentices. There are 28 learners working towards apprenticeships in team leading or advanced apprenticeships in management.

43. All of the team-leading learners, about 40 per cent of the customer service learners, and 10 per cent of the business administration learners, are working for large national employers. The rest, and both of the management learners, are working for small and medium-sized employers, or other large employers.

44. Learners are already employed when they start their programme. Recruitment is carried out through call centre contact or mailshots sent to employers. A training officer visits learners in the workplace every three weeks to provide induction, coaching and assessment. Learners take external tests for key skills and technical certificates.

*Strengths*

- good achievement
- good development of work-related skills and confidence in customer service
- good employer involvement
- good response to learning and assessment needs

*Weaknesses*

- insufficient planning of individual learning programmes
- incomplete initial advice and guidance for learners working for specialist employers

**Achievement and standards**

45. Success rates show a steady and continuing improvement across the area of learning, and are now good. Towards the end of 2005-06, overall success rates for apprentices and advanced apprentices were 58 per cent. This figure does not take into account some better success, as some learners who were targeted to achieve in the next year have already achieved in 2005-06. Business administration apprentices, particularly, make rapid progress through their qualification, although many of the learners are already qualified and experienced before starting their level 2 qualification. Some learners are working towards key skills qualifications at a higher level than that required for their framework.

Learners' portfolios are well organised and well presented, and learners' work is mainly of a satisfactory standard, although some business administration portfolios had unacceptable errors in spelling and grammar. Twenty per cent of learners progress from apprenticeships to advanced apprenticeships, not always in the same subject.

46. Customer service learners develop a good range of occupational skills. Learners gain additional skills to broaden their experience through working in several parts of the organisation. Some learners are promoted to supervisory roles. Learners are valued members of staff and contribute effectively to organisational improvements. They are well supported by their training officers who visit the workplace frequently. Learners' levels of confidence improve significantly and this enables them to use a variety of solutions to solve customers' problems. Business administration learners already have the skills needed to do their job, and gain little in the way of new skills or knowledge through their qualification. Many business administration apprentices already have qualifications at level 3, and do not find the level 2 work particularly challenging. However, they value the opportunity to think about their administrative practices in more depth. Most of the new knowledge learners gain is through their key skills and technical certificate work, particularly the work for assignments for the technical certificate.

Programme	End Year	Success Rate	No, of learners	Provider NVQ Rate	National NVQ Rate	Provider framework rate	National framework rate
Advanced Apprenticeships	2003-04	overall	219	68	46	47	28
		timely	203	47	30	31	18
	2004-05	overall	385	56	47	42	31
		timely	397	49	35	35	23
Apprenticeships	2003-04	overall	542	66	51	57	37
		timely	552	39	25	33	18
	2004-05	overall	778	59	56	54	45
		timely	748	41	35	38	28
NVQ training for young	2003-04	overall	6	50	48	0	0
		timely	6	50	35	0	0
	2004-05	overall	3	67	57	0	0
		timely	3	67	43	0	0

For details of how to calculate overall and timely success rates please refer to the "Quality Improvement Pack" (available from the Learning and Skills Council's website: [www.lsc.gov.uk](http://www.lsc.gov.uk)).

### The quality of provision

47. Employers are heavily involved in the learning programmes. The business development team makes first contact, and provides an overview of the available programmes. Employers attend the learners' induction programme, at which they receive their own informative induction pack. Many employers provide time for learners to complete work and are keen to help them develop their knowledge and understanding of company systems, often beyond their own job role. Employers are encouraged to write witness testimonies towards learners' qualification evidence. They participate in

identifying opportunities for assessment. Touchstone has worked effectively with national employers to match their training programmes to the NVQ, to provide evidence for the qualification. Employers have a good understanding of learners' progress, through participating in reviews that are carried out at each visit. Employers are very supportive and keen for their learners to succeed. Touchstone encourages the use of workplace mentors who are available on a day-to-day basis, especially when managers are not able to provide support. Touchstone recognised the strength of its employers in its self-assessment report.

48. The response to individual learning and assessment needs is good. At the beginning of training, learners take a comprehensive initial assessment which looks at their prior achievement, literacy and numeracy needs and level of vocational skills. Information from this is used effectively to ensure that the learner has sufficient scope within their job role to complete the qualification and to help learners tailor their optional units to match the requirements of their job. Tests to identify the levels of support needed by the learner are conveniently completed on a laptop computer in the workplace. All learners complete a basic and key skills builder test and the results are fed back to learners and employers and are used effectively to plan short-term learning targets. Learners' preferred learning styles are identified at this stage, and referred to when training is being planned. Short- and medium-term target-setting is effective. Regular and frequent mini learning sessions are delivered by training officers to individual learners in response to development needs. Training officers produce a session plan which clearly details the aims, objectives and content of the training and how learning will be measured. All learning sessions observed during inspection were satisfactory or better. A wide range of resources is available to help learners prepare for their technical certificate and other aspects of their qualification. Online resources have been made available recently, but, as yet, few learners have accessed them. Learners have a thorough understanding of their qualification and the evidence required. Many learners are able to reference evidence onto NVQ documents themselves. Assessments are well planned and, immediately before an observation, training officers question the learners about what evidence they can present to meet the criteria of the aspects to be assessed. Assessment practice is generally satisfactory, but observation records are long narrative descriptions and contain insufficient judgement. However, feedback following assessment is constructive and clearly identifies what further evidence is needed. Spelling and grammar mistakes in some administration learners' portfolios have not been identified, even though some evidence had been through assessment and internal verification on more than one occasion. Some of the learners who are working towards their qualification online are very positive about the benefits of immediate feedback from their training officer. However, training officers are failing to use technology to update the assessment process.

49. Long-term planning of individual learning programmes is insufficient. Targets set on individual learning plans for achievement of NVQ units and framework components are often set for the end of funding, and not by the learners' ability or work circumstances. Initial assessment is not used to plan a detailed overall programme of learning. In many cases, learners achieve their qualifications well before the date on their plans. Short-term target-setting is good and most learners concentrate only on what is required of them for their next visit. Many have little knowledge about what they need to do in the longer term. In many cases, learners' progress is determined by what is written on their feedback, review and assessment plan and not by evidence that is generated in their job role. Judgements based on percentage completion of frameworks made at review

meetings are often misleading.

50. The initial advice and guidance offered is not impartial for learners working for specialist employers. Touchstone does not offer specialist qualifications for specialist employers. Many of the business administration learners are working in estate agents' offices, and some expressed an interest in developing their careers in estate agency. But the company does not offer the specialist framework designed for apprentices and advanced apprentices in property management, and does not direct potential learners to other providers who might offer it. Similarly, several learners are working in the financial sector, where administration is part but not all of their role. They are not offered one of the more relevant apprenticeships or advanced apprenticeships in financial services to reflect the totality of their role, and are not signposted to a different provider.

### **Leadership and management**

51. Training officers, internal verifiers and team leaders regularly maintain and update their professional competence. This was a strength in the self-assessment report. They are expected to work in their occupational area for a short period every two years, as well as attending updates from the sector skills councils or equivalent bodies, on new standards and frameworks as they are developed. There are assessors who have the basic skills qualification and they are available to support learners with additional learning needs, but there are no learners in this area of learning identified as having these needs. Internal verification is satisfactory, except where it has failed to identify shortfalls in the assessment of business administration portfolios. The internal verifiers' quality improvement role works well in developing training officers' training practice, as well as their assessment practice. Learners are regularly tested on their knowledge of health and safety, equal opportunities, and awareness of their programme, but the questions used are limited and repetitive.

