

GR and MM Blackledge

Inspection date

20 June 2008

Inspection number

321603

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Background information

Inspection judgements

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made on www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of the inspection, inspectors take account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body. Where appropriate, inspectors also consider the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk), reports from the inspectorates' monitoring visits, and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the previous inspection.

In addition to reporting on overall effectiveness of the organisation, its capacity to improve further, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management, this inspection focused on specialist provision in:

- Retail and commercial enterprises

Description of the provider

1. GR and MM Blackledge is a national retailer of toiletry, health and beauty products, founded in 1970. The headquarters and main distribution centre is based in Lancashire. The company currently has a workforce of 1,500. The company holds a contract with the National Employer Service for the provision of government funded learning for young people through apprenticeship programmes and training for adults through a Train to Gain contract. Currently, 28 learners are following apprenticeship programmes of which 23 are apprentices with five following advanced apprenticeship programmes. On Train to Gain programmes 56 learners are working towards national vocational qualifications (NVQs) at levels 2 and 3. In addition to these government-funded learners, the company is privately funding five advanced apprentices and nine apprentices who do not meet government funding criteria. All learners are employed by the company and recruited from any of their 131 stores situated throughout the UK. Training and assessment takes place on an individual basis within any of the stores where learners are located.
2. The company is overseen by a board of four directors, two of whom are the founders of the company. The training and human resources manager is directly responsible for operational day-to-day training and reports to the board. The training programme is administered by three assessors and one administrator who reports to the training and human resources manager. The senior management and store managers are all actively involved in training within each store. They evaluate the impact of training as part of the overall performance management of the store.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Good: Grade 2
Capacity to improve	Good: Grade 2
Achievement and standards	Good: Grade 2
Quality of provision	Good: Grade 2
Leadership and management	Good: Grade 2
Equality of opportunity	Contributory grade: Satisfactory: Grade 3

Sector subject area

Retailing and wholesaling	Good: Grade 2
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Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Good: Grade 2

3. The overall effectiveness of the provision is good. Achievement and standards, the quality of provision and leadership and management are all good. Provision in retail and wholesaling is also good. Equality of opportunity is satisfactory.

Capacity to improve

Good: Grade 2

4. The provider has demonstrated that it is in a good position to make improvements. The overall strategies for improving the provision are well developed and clearly linked to the needs of both the business and learners. A new training manager has been recently recruited specifically to focus on the development of training within the company. The provider places a strong emphasis on continuous improvement and many aspects of the provision have been improved since the previous inspection. The development and introduction of new workbooks has had a positive impact on learning and further investment has been made in developing an e-learning programme. Quality assurance systems have been developed and improved since the previous inspection. Success rates on all programmes have improved. The quality improvement plan is well constructed with realistic targets and closely focuses on the learners' experience. The provider has worked with awarding bodies to improve and develop new programmes to ensure that learners develop good employability skills that meet the needs of the business and the retail industry as a whole. The provider has made good progress in taking steps since the previous inspection to improve quality and raise standards. Weaknesses found at the previous inspection have been remedied and strengths have been maintained. Many of the areas for improvement identified within the current quality improvement plan have already been resolved.
5. The self-assessment process is satisfactory. Staff understand the self-assessment process and its importance in driving continuous improvement. However, the process is not linked to a quality calendar and it is not sufficiently clear how and when evaluation of key processes will take place. The self-assessment process covers all areas of the government funded training and the privately funded learning. The report is largely accurate and reflects the provision well. Inspection findings matched most of the strengths and weaknesses identified in the report. However, in some cases the inspection grades were higher. Some of the weaknesses within the current report have been satisfactorily resolved. The self-assessment report is sufficiently critical with clear evidence to support key judgements. The self-assessment is closely linked to the overall quality improvement plan.

Key strengths

- High in-year success rates
- Good development of retail and personal skills
- Good on-the-job training with particularly effective individual support

- Good strategic development
- Very effective open and supportive management style
- Comprehensive collection and effective analysis and use of data

Key areas for improvement

- Insufficient use of information from the initial assessment
- Insufficient formal evaluation of some aspects of the provision

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Good: Grade 2

6. Achievement and standards are good. Overall apprenticeship success rates in-year are high. They have increased significantly during the current year and are much improved

when compared with the 50% success rates in the 2006/07 period. Timely success rates for the current year are also high having increased significantly from the previous year. Train to Gain success rates are consistently high. Most learners are making very good progress towards achieving the goals in their individual learning plans. This is a strength identified by the provider in the self-assessment report.

7. Learners develop good retail, personal and social skills. Many learners develop good time management skills and are able to organise and meet work deadlines. Learners have good working relationships with their colleagues helping them build confidence and self-esteem. All learners achieve very good standards of retail work. They are efficient in keeping stock on sale at required levels. Learners are enthusiastic and enjoy their learning. They have good records of attendance and timekeeping and demonstrate a good work ethic.

Quality of provision

Good: Grade 2

8. Teaching and learning are good. On-the-job training is well-structured and assessors and managers provide very effective on-the-job coaching. This was identified as a strength in the self-assessment report. Assessors and store managers have a good understanding of the qualifications. Where the learners' job roles do not meet all of the requirements of the NVQ, additional training is provided to ensure that learners can achieve. Good quality workbooks have been developed and are used well to support learning. Workbooks are closely linked to company policies and procedures as well as linked to the NVQ and apprenticeship requirements. Assessors provide good quality coaching during their regular visits. This includes retail skills such as merchandising and customer service, as well as key skills and personal development.
9. Assessment practice is satisfactory. Assessment planning is thorough, and assessors have a very good understanding of the awarding body standards and how these apply in the workplace. They give good guidance and advice on assessment opportunities. Workbooks are effectively used to record evidence to confirm skills competences. Overall, the assessment strategy is very effective in helping learners to progress.
10. Initial assessment effectively gathers information on literacy and numeracy to identify any support needs, but it does not sufficiently gather wider information in relation to personal development needs or the wider key skills. No skills analysis is currently available for level 3. Insufficient information from initial assessment is recorded in individual learning plans to effectively plan an individual's learning.
11. The range of provision is satisfactory. Training programmes are planned to meet the company's specific business needs, equipping learners with the skills and knowledge required to provide a high standard of customer service. Learners have opportunities to progress to higher level courses. However, progression rates to level 3 are low.
12. Guidance and support are good. Support offered to learners is particularly effective in helping them to make steady progress through their awards. This is a strength identified in the self-assessment report. Assessors and managers collaborate well to offer learners practical advice, guidance and support throughout their programmes ensuring, for

example, that learners receive sufficient time away from the sales floor to complete theory training and are provided with the necessary learning opportunities. Thorough briefings are provided to ensure learners are well-prepared for their technical certificate tests. The company has reviewed its strategy for providing skills for life support to ensure individual needs are more effectively met. Individualised key skills support is particularly good.

13. Success in meeting identified support needs is evaluated during quarterly progress reviews. The review process is generally satisfactory, however, in some cases, the learner's understanding of equal opportunities is insufficiently tested. Most reviews take place within the agreed timescales. Reviews completed when learners finish their programmes are used well to discuss the impact that the programme has had on the learner personally and on their performance at work. They are also used to identify further training and support needs and to discuss how these can be met.

Leadership and management

Good: Grade 2

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade: Satisfactory: Grade 3

14. Leadership and management are good. The provider has a clear strategic view of how training will be developed to enhance the employability of learners and meet the needs of the company. This is identified as a strength within the self-assessment report. The provider has a strong focus on developing staff, accrediting their existing skills and developing new skills within the retail sector. A new training manager has been appointed and been in post for four months. The change to the management structure is having a positive impact on training within the company. Training is seen as a significant feature of the company and many staff have progressed to management and supervisory positions as a result of the internal training programme. The provider has worked with awarding bodies to develop a range of qualifications that meet the needs of the retail industry. Business planning processes are sound and involve clear rationales for developing the provision to meet the needs of both learners and the company. Staff have a clear understanding of the company's training objectives and morale is high. The apprenticeship and adult training scheme has a clearly stated role within the overall strategic plan and is a significant part of the company's quality improvement plan. The quality improvement plan is realistic with clear milestones enabling progress to be assessed. The plan is regularly reviewed and updated and is well understood by staff. A skills for life strategy is in place that appropriately meets the needs of learners who are able to receive individual support in the workplace.
15. The open and supportive management team encourage the assessment team to identify ways to improve the provision and they in turn are confident about discussing their ideas with senior managers. Staff appreciate the informal contact they have with all levels of management. There are many good examples of senior managers who have progressed within the company. The provider places a strong emphasis on creating good working relationships and learners are encouraged and motivated by staff at all levels in a mutually supportive environment. The company celebrates and recognises learners' success.
16. Communications are particularly effective. Staff at all levels receive up to date and clear information about the company and the training objectives and progression routes are

outlined well. Senior managers play a significant role in ensuring that learners are receiving a good experience. Regular meetings take place with a strong focus on continuous improvement. The training manager meets with the assessment team on a weekly basis and learner progress is a key agenda item.

17. The collection and use of data is good. The centrally held database records assessments and progress reviews. A 'traffic light' system indicates whether a learner is falling behind with assessments or when progress reviews are due. It also monitors learners' progress and achievement. A good range of reports is produced for assessors and is used effectively at team meetings to identify learners at risk.
18. Quality assurance systems cover many of the key aspects of learning. However, no overall formal system is in place to ensure that compliance and evaluation are routinely carried out. Systems are in place to audit key procedures and compliance checks do take place, but no systematic analysis of results occurs. Evaluation of measures introduced to improve the provision does not happen in a timely manner. This has been identified by the provider in its current self-assessment and an improvement strategy is in place.
19. Equality of opportunity is satisfactory. An appropriate equality and diversity policy is in place for both the company and the training division. The policy covers all aspects of the relevant legislation and clearly outlines how harassment and discrimination will be treated by the company. The policy also covers recruitment. Data is routinely collected on ethnicity, gender and faith. The training provision broadly reflects the ethnic, gender and faith population of the company as a whole. The equality of opportunity and diversity policy does not have any targets to increase participation by particular groups. All employees have access to training and learners who are unable to meet the criteria for government funded training are privately funded by the company. Equality of opportunity is monitored during review. However, the reinforcement or development of a wider understanding does not occur. Procedures to ensure learners remain safe are in place with appropriate policies for risk assessments and recruitment of staff. Staff have received recent training and both staff and learners understand the policies operated by the company.

What learners like:

- The help from assessors
- The prospect of a better future career
- The chance to get a professional qualification
- The opportunity to learn about retailing
- The opportunity to progress further
- 'I feel proud about achieving a qualification'
- 'The recognition I get from the staff'
- 'The increased confidence I feel'
- 'The enjoyment I get from studying'

What learners think could improve:

- The wording in the workbooks could be simpler
- 'The time I have to collect evidence for the qualification'
- The clarity about the level 3 award

Annex

Learners' achievements

Success rates on **work-based learning apprenticeship programmes** managed by the provider **2004 to 2007**.

Programme	End Year	Success rate	No. of learners*	Provider NVQ rate**	National NVQ rate**	Provider framework rate**	National framework rate**
Apprenticeships	2004/05	overall	8	75	43	50	32
		timely	4	50	25	0	19
	2005/06	overall	22	59	51	50	47
		timely	30	30	38	27	35
	2006/07	overall	38	53	56	50	53
		timely	37	11	44	8	42

* Learners who leave later than originally planned are counted in the year they actually leave. This group of learners are then added to the learners who planned to complete in a given year and did so or left earlier than planned.

** Provider and national qualification success rates are calculated using LSC published data derived from the 'Individual Learning Record'

Success rates on **work-based learning Train to Gain programmes** managed by the provider **2006 to 2008**.

Programme	End Year	Success rate	No. of learners*	Provider NVQ rate
Train to Gain ***	2006/07	overall	25	79%
		timely	25	64%
	2007/08	overall	63	93%
		timely	60	55%

Note: 2007/08 data is 'part-year' only and is representative of the first three months or greater of the LSC contract year

* Learners who leave later than originally planned are counted in the year they actually leave. This group of learners are then added to the learners who planned to complete in a given year and did so or left earlier than planned.

** Provider qualification success rates are calculated using LSC published data derived from the 'Individual Learning Record'

*** Includes 'Train to Gain' long course NVQ provision, but not 'skills for life'