



TRAINING STANDARDS COUNCIL

INSPECTION REPORT JUNE 2000

# A. F. Blakemore and Son Ltd

## SUMMARY

A. F. Blakemore and Son's warehousing training has poor retention and achievement rates. There is little co-ordination of the NVQ training. The good work-based training and assessment opportunities are not linked to the NVQ requirements. The company has a revised equal opportunities policy but it fails to monitor its work or promote equality of opportunity. Individual training plans are poor and there is no initial assessment. There is a lack of accurate information and data available to assist management decisions. No quality assurance arrangements are in place to ensure the quality of the NVQ training provision. There is non-compliance with some aspects of the NVQ training contract and self-assessment is not an established part of the company's processes.

### GRADES

OCCUPATIONAL AREAS	GRADE
Retailing & customer service	4

GENERIC AREAS	GRADE
Equal opportunities	5
Trainee support	5
Management of training	5
Quality assurance	5

### KEY STRENGTHS

- ◆ well-delivered and varied training activities
- ◆ thorough company induction for warehousing trainees

### KEY WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no initial assessment to identify training needs
- ◆ no strategies for providing additional support
- ◆ lack of progress reviews
- ◆ missed assessment opportunities
- ◆ slow progress and poor achievement
- ◆ ineffective co-ordination of NVQ training provision
- ◆ no monitoring of equal opportunities
- ◆ lack of accurate information and data
- ◆ no formal quality assurance arrangements
- ◆ non-compliance with some aspects of the NVQ training contract
- ◆ lack of established self-assessment process

## INTRODUCTION

1. A. F. Blakemore and Son Ltd is a nationally known distribution company for the retail and catering industries. The company started in 1959, becoming part of the Spar group in 1975. The company opened one of the first cash and carry warehouses in the country in Wolverhampton in 1962. New headquarters were opened at Longacres Industrial estate in Willenhall, near Walsall in the early 1980s and in 1990 the company started a shop-fitting company on the same site. It is the largest employer in the Walsall area. The training department is based on the Longacres site. The company offers national vocational qualifications (NVQs) in warehousing, business administration, customer service and key skills to their own employees.

2. NVQs were introduced for company staff in 1998, with the aim of improving staff retention and the skills of existing and potential staff for the organisation. External advisors managed the recruitment of the current NVQ trainees approximately 15 months ago. There was no initial assessment or induction. The company decided to become an approved NVQ training centre in June 1999. This was managed initially by an NVQ training manager who left in October 1999. The company's training manager then integrated the management of the NVQ training provision into her role. The company continues to use some external support to work alongside its own staff for assessment and internal verification. The National Training Partnership (NTP) provides support on contracting issues.

3. The training contract for June 1999 to March 2000 was for 60 national trainees. The company contracts with NTP which contracts with Walsall Training and Enterprise Council (TEC). The contract for April 2000 - March 2001 is for 56 national trainees and six trainees on the work-based programmes. The company received the 2000-01 contract from NTP, on the last day of inspection. In addition the company has a contract with the Employment Service for the employment option of the New Deal. There are 15 warehousing, five business administration and one New Deal client. In addition, there are three warehousing and one business administration employees who have recently had to leave the funded scheme as they are now 25 years old and are continuing with their NVQs supported by the company.

4. All the NVQ trainees are employed by the company. In warehousing there is a three months probationary period which includes a thorough induction to the company with on- and off-the-job company training and assessment. All staff, under the age of 25 years, in the warehousing and administration areas of the company on the Longacres site are given the opportunity to apply for NVQ training schemes. In the financial year 1999-2000 there was a 58 per cent turnover in the company workforce, compared to 37 per cent in the previous year.

5. The main industry in Walsall in 1996 was manufacturing, with the wholesale and retail trade the next largest. The growth in employment in the wholesale and retail trade was 4.8 per cent below the national growth rate in this sector, though



forecasts point to expansion in the future.

6. Walsall's 16-24 age group represents 19.6 per cent of the long-term unemployed in the area, which is 5.3 per cent above the national average. Unemployment in general in the area is high at around 17 per cent.

## INSPECTION FINDINGS

7. The training manager and the personnel resources manager compiled the self-assessment report four months in advance of the inspection. There was little involvement of the training department staff and no involvement from trainees and workplace staff. The self-assessment report included much detail about the delivery of the training provision, especially the company induction period for the new warehousing employees and the new NVQ induction session. Many of the strengths listed are normal practice for work-based training provision. There were no weaknesses identified for the business administration provision. Inspectors agreed with some of the strengths in the self-assessment report and with most of the weaknesses identified. Some of the ‘strengths’ in the report were found to be weaknesses by inspectors, especially in management of training and quality assurance. Many further weaknesses were identified and in all areas the inspection grades were lower than in the self-assessment report, significantly so in three areas.

8. A team of three inspectors spent a total of 12 days with A. F. Blakemore and Son Ltd, in June 2000. Warehousing was the only occupational area inspected due to very low numbers in the other areas. Trainees and staff from the other occupational areas were involved in the inspection to contribute to the generic report. Inspectors interviewed 19 trainees, including two people who had recently withdrawn from the NVQ training provision, but still worked at the company. Twenty-five staff of A. F. Blakemore and Son Ltd were interviewed by inspectors, including all the training department staff, the personnel resources manager, operations director and his deputy, workplace trainers and managers and two internal verifiers who work part-time within the training department. Inspectors visited the main warehousing workplace areas on the Longacres site. Documentary evidence was examined, including trainees’ files, portfolios, individual training plans, training materials, awarding body reports, contract details, minutes of meetings and the training provision policies.

Grades awarded to induction, training and review sessions

	GRADE 1	GRADE 2	GRADE 3	GRADE 4	GRADE 5	TOTAL
Business administration		2				2
Retailing & customer service	2	3				5
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>7</b>

### OCCUPATIONAL AREAS

#### Retailing & customer service

**Grade 4**

9. A. F. Blakemore and Sons Ltd offers NVQs in warehousing at level 2. All the

trainees are employees of the company. Trainees work at the Longacres site in various departments of the distribution depot. The company is a newly accredited centre for NVQs. It started managing its own NVQ training provision in June 1999, since when there have been no achievements of the warehousing NVQ award or accreditation of any NVQ units. Of the 58 trainees who started in June 1999, there were 28 on the programme in February 2000 and 15 trainees at the time of inspection. In addition, there are three trainees who started on the programme last year and are now over 25 years old. They are no longer eligible for the TEC funding and are continuing on the NVQ programme supported by the company. There is one New Deal client taking the NVQ level 2 in warehousing.

10. All new warehousing employees complete an on- and off-the-job induction training and assessment programme as part of the three-month company probationary period. Workplace assessors carry out assessments against company criteria after four, eight and 12 weeks. The induction programme includes health and safety, food hygiene and customer care training. Company devised workbooks are completed to check trainees' knowledge and understanding. When the probationary period is successfully completed, trainees can apply to follow the NVQ level 2 in warehousing. A newly implemented NVQ induction session informs them about the NVQ programme before they enroll. NVQ practical assessments usually take place in the trainees' workplace. In order to complete all aspects of the NVQ, trainees may receive extra training or be moved to different areas of the company for further work experience, skills training and assessment. Inspectors agreed with some strengths in the self-assessment report. The report did not identify weaknesses identified by inspectors. Inspectors awarded a lower grade than that identified in the self-assessment report.

#### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ well-delivered and varied training activities
- ◆ good range of company work experience opportunities
- ◆ good standard of NVQ portfolio work

#### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ slow progress and poor NVQ achievement
- ◆ missed assessment opportunities
- ◆ lack of understanding of NVQs
- ◆ poor retention rates

11. There is a variety of training activities which are carried out effectively. Training sessions are well resourced using a good mix of training aids, such as interactive workbooks, videos, flipcharts, overhead transparencies and photographs. Information given on the site tour relates theory to practice and observations are used in discussion afterwards. There is an effective mix of training methods. Attendance at off-the-job sessions is planned around shift and

**POOR PRACTICE**

*There is no systematic re-booking of the warehousing assessments that are cancelled owing to production demands.*

work patterns. The off-the-job training room is adjacent to a warehouse area in the training department and is appropriate for the small groups of six to eight trainees that it accommodates. During the NVQ programme trainees are given a little time off the job to complete their NVQ portfolios. Some trainees receive additional training in order to complete the NVQ in aspects of the work that they are not familiar with.

12. Trainees can be moved to different departments of the company in order to gain experience in the range of skills needed to cover the NVQ. The NVQ trainers/assessors and the workplace trainers and assessors have current occupational competence. Some trainees can complete company-based lift-truck training and receive a certificate that is used as evidence towards the NVQ. The standard of trainees' work is good and their NVQ portfolios are of a good standard and well presented. Evidence is clearly referenced to NVQ requirements.

13. Achievement is poor. No trainees have gained an NVQ in the past 12 months. Progress is slow. Six months is a typical completion time for the NVQ level 2. During the programme there is no systematic NVQ unit accumulation and the NVQ progress records are not kept up to date. Trainees lack an awareness of their progress or what they have still to do to complete. No NVQ progress reviews took place with any trainees until May 2000 and some trainees have yet to have a review.

14. On-the-job assessment is cancelled if the company workload suddenly increases. The time given to on-the-job NVQ activities is dependent on individual negotiation between the trainee, workplace manager and NVQ assessor. The training manager has made arrangements to protect workplace bonuses while trainees are completing NVQ activities, although it is acknowledged in the company that urgent work takes priority. There are ineffective assessment practices and many missed assessment opportunities. Work-based observations by assessors are not used effectively and are not matched to all relevant NVQ criteria, which has resulted in unnecessarily repeated assessments. The work completed during induction and some work-based evidence are not used effectively to maximise on NVQ achievement. There is little use of work-based evidence such as witness testimonies and personal statements to support the NVQ. Workplace managers have little NVQ involvement.

15. The NVQ trainers/assessors are newly qualified and are inexperienced. There is a lack of understanding and awareness by trainers, assessors, trainees and workplace managers of how NVQ requirements relate to workplace activities and company assessment. The recent cross-referencing of the company training criteria to the NVQ requirements is not yet fully implemented. The NVQ training manager received reports of trainees' NVQ progress from all but one assessor in May 2000. Different reporting formats were used and some reports did not show trainees' NVQ progress clearly. There are plans to introduce new tracking systems and forms have now been prepared. Thirty-eight trainees and one New Deal client left the programme without any NVQ accredited achievement.

16. Retention is poor. Fifteen of 56 original trainees are still on the TEC funded

scheme, 13 having left since February 2000. One of the two New Deal clients is still on the programme. The company does not record or analyse information to readily identify retention and achievement rates.

## GENERIC AREAS

### Equal opportunities

**Grade 5**

17. Some equal opportunities data are collected on application forms. They are not analysed for staff or trainees within the company. All the trainees taking the NVQs in business administration and customer service are women. All trainees taking the NVQ in warehousing are men, similar to the national picture. There is an equal opportunities policy and statement that has recently been revised. The self-assessment report identified one strength, that inspectors consider to be normal practice, and three weaknesses, with which inspectors agreed. The self-assessment report acknowledged that the company does not comply with its own equal opportunities procedures and monitoring. The action plan submitted with the self-assessment report included few points to address the identified weaknesses. Inspectors awarded a lower grade than in the self-assessment report.

#### **POOR PRACTICE**

*In an office accessible to the warehousing trainees there are posters that could cause offence. Some trainees use offensive language and little action is taken by trainers and workplace managers to stop them.*

#### STRENGTHS

- ◆ good use of equal opportunities policy at induction

#### WEAKNESSES

- ◆ no monitoring of equal opportunities in work-based training
- ◆ lack of staff training on equal opportunities
- ◆ no active promotion of equal opportunities

18. The company has a recently updated equal opportunities policy and statement. It is clearly written and staff and trainees understand the policy. It is discussed in detail in the NVQ induction session when the company handbook is issued. Staff and trainees have access to the policy during induction, where questions are used to check trainees' understanding. Trainees are also given information on who to speak to if they have any problems. Trainees are told that they can complain, although there is no written complaints procedure. Some action does take place to resolve complaints, but no record is kept. The ethnic mix of trainees reflects the local community. No data are available to confirm this or compare company staff generally to those following NVQs. There is good access to most areas of the company for those with limited mobility and particularly in the new chilled foods department where a purpose-built ramp and lift have been installed.

19. The equal opportunities policy is not monitored effectively. There is no monitoring of equal opportunities data collected on application forms. There is no systematic analysis of data in relation to equal opportunities and no input to management decisions or policy. There is no training to raise trainers' awareness

of the broad aspects of equal opportunities in work-based training. There are no mechanisms for identifying trainees with additional support needs.

20. A recent company survey shows dissatisfaction with the NVQ training achievements in the company and concerns that trainees and staff are not listened to when they have ideas for improvement. Large posters are displayed on notice boards around the company to show the results of the surveys and the response of the management. Trainees are not consulted on the effectiveness of equal opportunities policies and procedures. The publicity materials do not reflect diversity or promote non-stereotypical occupations. There are no strategies or procedures to promote equal opportunities in the NVQ training provision recruitment or during the NVQ programme.

### **Trainee support**

### **Grade 5**

21. Trainees who wish to enroll onto the NVQ programme complete the paperwork with a member of staff from the National Training Partnership who visits the company to support the training staff. A new NVQ induction has been developed in an attempt to improve the poor retention rates. This is run by staff from the training department. From June 2000, small groups of potential NVQ trainees attend the induction session to inform them about NVQs before they enrol. Before joining the company, all potential warehousing employees complete a numeracy and literacy assessment. The purpose of this is to find out if they will be able to cope with the warehouse work. There are no basic skills or key skills initial assessments at the start of the NVQ programme. Inspectors agreed with two strengths identified in the self-assessment report and both weaknesses. Further weaknesses were identified and the grade awarded by inspectors is lower than that in the self-assessment report.

#### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ comprehensive company induction for warehousing staff

#### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ no initial assessment to identify additional support and training needs
- ◆ poor individual training plans
- ◆ no strategies for providing additional support
- ◆ lack of NVQ reviews and poor monitoring of progress

22. The company's warehousing induction programme includes a variety of activities relating to the NVQ requirements. The warehousing induction work pack provides a reference document for the new warehouse staff. The programme focuses on the workplace requirements and emphasises workplace health and safety practices. All NVQ trainees in warehousing complete the company induction programme, either when they join the company or at the start of the NVQ programme. Evidence that can be used for NVQs is gathered during the warehousing company induction, training and assessment period.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

*The results of the warehousing probationary period assessments at four, eight and twelve weeks are in the trainee personnel files, although they are not used towards the NVQs*

23. There is no initial assessment of trainees' abilities in literacy or numeracy. The company's initial assessment of new warehousing employees is not analysed to determine additional support needs or used to prepare the individual training plans. There is no systematic identification of the trainees' prior experience in relation to the requirements of the NVQ. The training department staff lack an understanding of the individual training plan documents. Staff from the NTP visit the company to complete the forms with the trainees. The individual training plans are not used as working documents and have not been up-dated in the past 12 months. The individual training plans are incomplete. They lack realistic individual targets, and they do not reflect the varied prior work experiences of the trainees or the progress they are making towards the NVQ.

24. There are no strategies for identifying or providing additional support for trainees who may have literacy or numeracy problems. Staff are not qualified to support trainees with additional or specialist needs. Trainees are not referred to external agencies for support. Planned review dates are not recorded on the individual training plans and there are no dates to show any reviews being completed. Few reviews have taken place since May 2000. Assessors keep their own records of their trainees' progress. Exit interviews are not systematically carried out with trainees when they leave the NVQ programme to determine the reasons for doing so.

**Management of training****Grade 5**

25. The company had several significant senior staff changes in the 18-month period prior to the inspection. These have had a direct impact on the work of the training department and on trainees. Since October 1999, management of the NVQ training contract has been the responsibility of the training manager who is responsible to the personnel and resources manager. The training department team includes the training manager, three training officers, who are all recently qualified assessors, and an administrator who is also a new assessor. There is one freelance warehousing assessor on a temporary contract. All assessors are occupationally competent in the areas they assess. The training department team has been involved in managing the newly accredited NVQ training provision and the introduction of NVQs to company staff during the period of significant company change. The job roles and responsibilities for the NVQ trainer/assessors have recently changed.

26. Formal procedures and action planning are not established in the training department. The self-assessment report identified strengths that were either not directly related to NVQ training or were normal practice and one which inspectors found to be a weakness. Inspectors agreed with two weaknesses in the self-assessment report and identified several more. The grade awarded by inspectors is significantly lower than in the self-assessment report.

### *STRENGTHS*

- ◆ recent management initiatives to address weaknesses

### *WEAKNESSES*

- ◆ ineffective co-ordination of the on- and off-the-job training
- ◆ lack of strategic planning for training
- ◆ no systematic staff reviews
- ◆ lack of clarity in NVQ training responsibilities
- ◆ little involvement of workplace managers in NVQ training
- ◆ no accurate information and data to assist management decisions
- ◆ poor understanding of training scheme documents by training staff

27. A number of changes have been introduced recently and more are planned. It is too early to assess their impact. Strategic planning is weak. The training manager does not have satisfactory information on trainees' progress. New tracking sheets have been produced but have not yet been used. The job roles of the trainer/assessors in the training department have been changed recently. Probationary training in the workplace and company assessments in warehousing are now the responsibility of the work-based assessors. Training department staff are responsible for off-the-job training and on-the-job NVQ assessments.

28. The training department's staff work effectively with the external consultants. The training department offers a good range of training to meet company needs and ensure that the workforce has appropriate and current qualifications. Training sessions are offered in subjects such as: health and safety, manual handling, food hygiene, lift-truck driving and team leadership skills. Staff are nominated for courses by their managers to meet expected role changes and company requirements. Some of the courses taken relate to NVQ requirements and can be used as evidence of competence.

29. Co-ordination of the on- and off-the-job NVQ training is not effective. The roles and responsibilities of the work-based trainers and training department staff focus on different aspects of the training and the links between them are weak. Liaison between the work-based trainers and NVQ trainer/assessors is weak and there is a lack of clarity in how the roles complement each other for the benefit of the trainees. The work-based trainers who are themselves taking NVQs have a good awareness of how work-based activities relate to NVQ criteria. The absence of cross-referencing between the company training and NVQ training has prevented effective links.

30. The targets set have not been met. There are no interim targets and no systematic review of progress. In warehousing, the work-based trainers are told if trainees are not performing well and need further support. There is no observation of the on- or off-the-job training to help trainers improve their performance. There are no formal reviews of staff performance or self-assessment procedures to aid staff reflection. There is a lack of clarity in the role of the work-based trainers,

**POOR PRACTICE**

*There are no service agreements or other useful information given to workplace staff by the training department to clarify the partnership in the work-based NVQ training provision.*

department managers and department general managers linked to the NVQ provision. Workplace managers do not receive written reports to inform them about the progress of their staff towards the NVQs. They have a lack of awareness about trainees' progress or completion dates. There are no formal monitoring or review procedures to compare workplace performance and NVQ performance.

31. Information collected about trainees on the NVQ training provision lacks detail to inform management decisions. There are no procedures to ensure that data are collected systematically, and in the same format from all assessors for collation and use. Training and assessment activities are not systematically recorded and reported to the training manager. Three warehousing trainees listed were not active on the NVQ training programmes. One had left the company and two had stopped participating in the NVQ programme. The training department staff have a poor understanding of the TEC training scheme documents and the training contract requirements.

**Quality assurance****Grade 5**

32. Following recent change in senior management some quality assurance activities previously operated, including quality council meetings, have been started up again. The self-assessment section failed to recognise the serious weaknesses in this area. The grade awarded by inspectors was lower than that identified in the self-assessment report.

**STRENGTHS**

- ◆ no significant strengths identified

**WEAKNESSES**

- ◆ no formal quality assurance arrangements for the NVQ provision
- ◆ poor internal verification system
- ◆ inadequate arrangements for sharing good practice
- ◆ little analysis of data for improving the quality of training
- ◆ non-compliance with some aspects of the training contract
- ◆ lack of established self-assessment procedures

32. The new management has re-introduced the 'Quality First' procedures that have not been active in the Longacres site for approximately 18 months. The impact on the NVQ training provision is indirect, but significant, as all trainees are company staff. This is due to the current lack of priority given to training activities when the company's workloads increase. There is a range of informal quality assurance arrangements in the training department and the staff work closely as a team. Staff react positively to identified issues and work together to make improvements. The quality assurance arrangements are informal and over-dependent on close team working.

**POOR PRACTICE**

*The team briefings for training department staff concentrate mostly on core company business and there is little coverage of training issues.*

33. There is a lack of formal quality assurance arrangements. This was noted as a weakness in the self-assessment report. Observations of workplace assessments have been introduced recently to aid internal verification. This is as part of the action plan from the self-assessment report. Meetings to discuss training achievements and issues do not take place regularly. Internal verification services are supplied by an external company, which works with the training manager who is a qualified assessor and recently qualified as an internal verifier. Internal verification lacks rigour. Planning does not adequately allow for internal verification to evaluate different stages of the assessment process and to ensure an appropriate distribution across the NVQs and trainees. There is little feedback to assessors about their performance, a lack of co-ordination of their activities and no regular verification meetings to improve assessment practice. There is a lack of sharing of good practice among staff.

34. Data are not used to identify trends or to contribute to continuous improvement. Data are not collected in a way that enables comparisons to be made, for example, of trainees' NVQ progress between different departments, different assessors and different NVQ units. There is a lack of useful systematic feedback from trainees on the programme.

35. The requirements in some aspects of the training contract are not met. There is no initial assessment or use of systematic assessment and accreditation of prior learning to inform the preparation of realistic individual training plans. The individual training plans have missing information and are not up-dated or amended to reflect trainees' progress. The frequency of reviews is less than the contractual minimum of 13-week intervals. The training department does not keep complete records of NVQ training and assessment activities as required by the training contract. Key skills have only recently been introduced for the business administration national trainees.

36. The self-assessment process did not involve all training staff, trainees and workplace managers concerned with the NVQ provision. It identified accurately some strengths and weaknesses. However some identified strengths were found to be weaknesses by inspectors who also found a significant number of additional weaknesses. The grades awarded by inspectors were all lower than in the self-assessment report. The action plan submitted with the self-assessment report did not address all the weaknesses. The actions set out in the action plan had not been achieved by the target dates.