

TRAINING INSPECTION



Education and Training
Inspectorate

Training for Success
Apprenticeships and
ApprenticeshipsNI Provision in
Protocol Skills
Report of an Inspection
in January 2010

CONTENTS

Section	Page
PART ONE: SUMMARY	
1. CONTEXT	1
2. PROVISION	1
3. THE INSPECTION	2
4. MAIN FINDINGS	2
PART TWO: OVERALL QUALITY OF PROVISION	
5. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT	4
6. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS	5
7. QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING	6
PART THREE: PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL AREA REPORTS	
8. BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION	9
9. ESSENTIAL SKILLS	9
10. HOSPITALITY AND CATERING	10
11. RETAIL	11
12. TEAM LEADING	11
PART FOUR	
13. CONCLUSION	13
14. KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT	13
APPENDIX	

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

In assessing the various features of the provision, Inspectors relate their evaluations to six descriptors as set out below:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

PART ONE

SUMMARY

1. CONTEXT

1.1 Protocol Skills is a large private company which provides work-based training throughout the United Kingdom (UK). The company supplies training to more than 12,000 learners across the UK and specialises in the delivery of qualifications in the service industry. Protocol Skills works with a wide range of employers, and holds exclusive contracts for the provision of training with a significant number of large national companies.

1.2 Since 2007, Protocol Skills has been contracted by the Department for Employment and Learning (the Department) to supply training across Northern Ireland (NI) under the Training for Success Apprenticeships and ApprenticeshipsNI programme at level 2 in business administration, contact centre operations, customer service, hospitality and catering, retail and team leading.

1.3 Since October 2009 Protocol Skills has four offices in NI, located in Belfast, Londonderry, Mid-Ulster and Newry.

2. PROVISION

2.1 Protocol Skills operates a model of work-based training and learning in which support and assessment are provided for apprentices in their work placements by training assessors and where necessary essential skills tutors.

2.2 At the time of the inspection, Protocol Skills was providing training for 650 apprentices, throughout Northern Ireland. The apprentices work in a variety of settings, including small to medium-sized hospitality outlets, contact centres, retail environments and large national companies. The apprentices have a range of job roles, and are undertaking qualifications at Level 2 in business administration, hospitality and catering, retail or team leading. Of the apprentices recruited 246 (38%) were following apprenticeships in hospitality and catering, 198 (30%) in retail, 163 (25%) in team leading, 27 (4%) in business administration. In addition, a pilot group of 16 apprentices is undertaking training in contact centre operations. Of the apprentices, 240 (37%) are based in the Londonderry/Mid Ulster area, 196 (30%) in the Belfast area and 214 (33%) in the Newry area.

2.3 The apprentices enter the training programmes from a diverse range of backgrounds. There is considerable variation in their academic qualifications and prior experience in the workplace on entry to the programmes. Of the 650 apprentices currently on the training programmes, 227(35%) had no formal qualifications on entry; 293 (45%) of the apprentices had 4 General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) qualifications or equivalent at grades A*-C; 130 (20%) had achieved GCSE qualifications or equivalent at grades D-G; 20(3%) of the apprentices are graduates.

2.4 Around 41% (321) of the current apprentices are undertaking an essential skills qualification in communication and 46% (341) are undertaking application of number; 235 are undertaking both essential skills. The remainder of the apprentices are exempt from the essential skills as a result of prior achievements.

2.5 There are currently 34 staff working across the four Protocol Skills offices. Overall leadership and contract management is the responsibility of the Regional Director, who is supported by four area managers, one sales manager, 21 training assessors, two sales executives, three essential skills tutors and two operational assistants. The Northern Ireland

team receives regular support from the senior managers based at the Protocol Skills head office who take responsibility at national level for a variety of centralised support functions including: quality; people management; and sales and marketing. Apprentices are visited in the workplace on a monthly basis, and directed training and learning is provided by occupationally-competent training assessors and essential skills tutors.

3. THE INSPECTION

3.1 In January 2010 the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) carried out an inspection of the Training for Success Apprenticeships and ApprenticeshipsNI programmes in Protocol Skills. A team of seven inspectors and three associate assessors observed a total of 73 training sessions and interviewed 158 apprentices in both directed and workplace training. Extended discussions were held with the Regional Director, the area managers, administrative staff, training assessors and essential skills tutors, and with three senior managers from Head Office, including the Chief Executive of Protocol Skills. In addition, 71 workplace mentors and employers were interviewed by the inspection team. The team also examined samples of the apprentices' work, portfolios of evidence, personal training plans (PTPs), personal learning plans (PLPs) and action plans. The organisation's self-evaluation report and other relevant documentation were also scrutinised.

3.2 The arrangements for the inspection of pastoral care and the safeguarding of vulnerable groups includes the opportunity for apprentices to complete a confidential questionnaire prior to the inspection, as well as meetings by the inspection team with groups of apprentices across professional and technical programmes. Two hundred and twenty questionnaires were issued to apprentices, 137 (62%) of which were returned to the Inspectorate. The returns show that the apprentices' experiences in Protocol Skills are very good. In particular, they appreciate the good support they receive from staff, the good match between their workplace training and their target qualifications, and the clarity of the information the organisation provides about their training programmes. The Inspectorate has reported the outcomes of the questionnaires and the discussions held with apprentices to the Regional Director.

4. MAIN FINDINGS

4.1 In the areas inspected, the quality of education and training provided by Protocol Skills is very good. The organisation is meeting very effectively the training and pastoral needs of the apprentices; and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

4.2 The main strengths are the:

- very good leadership and management at all levels, including the well-embedded and robust arrangements for quality assurance and improvement;
- overall retention and success rates, which are good and excellent respectively, at 83% and 94%;
- very good standards demonstrated and achieved by the apprentices, in both their occupational programmes and essential skills;
- good or better quality of the training and learning in most of the training sessions observed;

- very good quality of the work placements; and
- robust planning to support the effective integration of the workplace training, the apprentices' job roles and responsibilities, and their target qualifications.

4.3 The main areas for improvement are the:

- provision of more systematic advice and guidance for apprentices, to support their career-planning and promote progression to higher levels of education and training; and
- increased opportunities for training assessors to develop their professional expertise to improve further the quality of the workplace training.

Table of Grades

Overall performance level (grade)	Very good (2)
Contributory performance levels (grades)	
Leadership and Management	Very Good (2)
Achievements and Standards	Very Good (2)
Quality of Provision for Learning	Good (3)
Area of Learning	
Business Administration	Very Good (2)
Essential Skills	Very Good (2)
Hospitality	Very Good (2)
Retail	Very Good (2)
Team Leading	Very Good (2)

PART TWO

OVERALL QUALITY OF PROVISION

5. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

5.1 The leadership and management of the ApprenticeshipsNI and Training for Success Apprenticeships programmes is very good at all levels of the organisation. There is a clear, learner-centred vision and a well-developed culture of self-evaluation and planning for continuous improvement. Good support is provided to the Regional Director by senior staff from Head Office. At a strategic level, standardised and rigorous processes for the design, delivery and evaluation of training and assessment have been developed and implemented across the regions. These Key Learning Processes (KLPs), are applied well by staff at all levels and are effective in promoting consistency in the training provision. Whilst a good start has been made to the adaptation of these processes to reflect the particular needs of the NI region, the senior managers recognise this is an area which requires further development.

5.2 The Regional Director provides outstanding leadership which is effective in promoting high standards and harmonious working relationships. There are open channels of communication between staff at all levels and clear evidence of strong and effective teamwork. The area managers and staff display a strong commitment to their work. The training assessors and essential skills tutors work together flexibly and effectively to plan provision and accommodate the changing demands of apprentices' and employers' work rotas. They have high expectations of the apprentices and provide them with very good levels of support. The work of the essential skills tutors is managed effectively across the region.

5.3 The respective roles of apprentices, workplace mentors or supervisors and employers are clearly defined. Good relationships, characterised by mutual respect, have been established between Protocol staff, the apprentices and employers. Protocol Skills offers a well-designed and integrated programme of training provision. It is not only effective in providing the apprentices with good opportunities to receive accreditation for previously acquired competences, but also enables them to progress in their learning through the acquisition of new occupational knowledge, skills and understanding, and appropriate opportunities for the development of essential skills.

5.4 The arrangements for self-evaluation and improvement planning are rigorous and robust. They include well-developed, systematic processes for obtaining regular feedback from apprentices, employers and mentors. Management information data is collated and analysed regularly, and used effectively to identify areas for improvement. An appropriate quality improvement cycle has been evolved to allow management and staff to regularly monitor, review and take action to improve the provision. The quality assurance procedures include regular observation of teaching, training and learning, and the training assessors and tutors are provided with clear and constructive feedback on their performance.

5.5 Effective and innovative strategies are in place to promote quality improvement, including the use of positive action groups (PAGS). These short-term working groups are implemented when areas for improvement are identified through the self-evaluation process. The group's task is to develop an action-plan to improve the quality of a particular aspect of provision, for example retention, staff induction, or the identification of good practice in training and learning. One example of the outcomes of the work of the PAGS is the implementation of a retention strategy. This involved the provision of more systematic pre-entry guidance for both employers and apprentices, and has been instrumental in

increasing the organisation's average overall retention rate, from poor at 49% for the period 2004-2007, to good at 83%, across the period 2007-2010. Other recent outcomes include the implementation of a more systematic and rigorous induction and mentoring process for new staff and the development of a quality manual for planning training on, 'What a Good Job Looks Like'.

5.6 Most staff are appropriately qualified and deployed effectively. The training assessor to apprentice ratio is 1 to 33, which is appropriate in the context of the model of training provided. The procedures for the induction of staff are comprehensive and effective in enabling new training assessors to extend their caseload incrementally as they develop the appropriate skills and grow in confidence. There are good opportunities for work-shadowing of, and mentorship from, experienced colleagues. All of the staff, including the senior managers, receive regular and constructive feedback and coaching through direct observation of their practice. Protocol Skills has its own management development programme, which includes leadership and management academies. There is, however, a need for training assessors and tutors to have the opportunity for industrial placements in relevant settings. A minority of the training assessors would also benefit from the opportunity to gain further professional qualifications in their specialist areas. To improve the quality of the provision further, all of the staff would benefit from training to develop further their teaching, training and pedagogic skills.

5.7 The quality of the physical resources is good. Protocol Skills has invested in good quality information and learning technology equipment, including laptops with wireless connectivity and mobile printers, to support training assessors and tutors in the delivery of directed training sessions. There is a good range of resources to support the development of the apprentices' occupational competences and essential skills. The paper-based and online materials used to support the apprentices' learning in essential skills are generally of a good quality. Protocol Skills has developed a useful comprehensive electronic learning library of resources called Ask ELLE. All of the apprentices have access to it. This resource is however currently under-used by apprentices. The programme specialists who are based in England are developing appropriate links with relevant Sector Skills Councils to ensure that all learning materials reflect contemporary industrial practice. Some of the standardised resource packs and booklets need to be reviewed to reflect regional variations, including legislation specific to Northern Ireland.

6. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

6.1 Almost all of the apprentices achieve very good standards in their work with clients and customers. They are highly motivated and keen to achieve their target qualifications. Most report that their confidence has increased significantly as a result of their training. A minority of the apprentices have been promoted recently, and report that this has been due in large part to improvements in their self-esteem as a result of their training. All of the apprentices are developing a good understanding of equality and diversity issues and are secure in their understanding of health and safety in the workplace.

6.2 Almost all of the apprentices are making good progress in their learning, at a pace appropriate to their prior learning and experience. They are developing well their personal skills in relating to and managing others and using their initiative appropriately. Apprentices on the retail programme can analyse daily sales, calculate variances of actual sales against targets, and communicate information effectively to staff and regional managers. All of the apprentices in this professional and technical area conduct sales and transactions to a high standard, and deal effectively with customer queries and returns. Most report that they have increased their knowledge and understanding of their roles and responsibilities, and are aware of the key legislation which covers issues such as the sale of goods and returns.

6.3 In contact centre operations, there is evidence of enhancement of the apprentices' knowledge and understanding of key management issues, including human resource management and employment law. Apprentices on the team leading programme collate sales data competently, and are confident in undertaking staff appraisals, training and selection. In hospitality and catering, apprentices discuss service processes and requirements confidently and competently. Apprentices on the business administration programme are developing well their skills in invoicing, use of spreadsheets, and the production of written memos.

6.4 The standards of all of the apprentices' literacy and numeracy skills are consistently good, and often very good. All of the apprentices are very highly motivated and enthusiastic about their essential skills programme. A minority of apprentices observed in the workplace during the inspection, who had entered the programme with very low levels of literacy, reported that the essential skills training they have received has not only developed their capacity to use communication and number skills more effectively in the workplace, but has also improved their confidence and self-esteem considerably. Protocol Skills is committed to enabling apprentices to develop their essential skills of literacy and numeracy. Currently, 321 apprentices are taking essential skills in communication, and 341 in numeracy. Of these, it is noteworthy that 54 (17%) and 66 (19%) respectively are working towards a level of literacy and numeracy above that required by their National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) framework.

6.5 Over the past three years, for the period 2007-2010, the average retention rate for the Training for Success Apprenticeships and the ApprenticeshipsNI programmes is good at 83%. The average success rate for the full frameworks for same period is excellent at 94%.

6.6 The overall success rate for essential skills across the same period is excellent at 100%.

7. QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING

7.1 The planning for the design and delivery of training is good and is effective in promoting coherent and cohesive training experiences across the apprenticeship programmes. The procedures for initial assessment and induction are rigorous and effective. In addition to a comprehensive health and safety vetting of the workplace by the training assessors, the apprentices' strengths and areas for development, including existing levels of competence, and essential skills capabilities, are clearly defined at the commencement of the training. The outcomes of assessments are used effectively to develop individualised learning plans, and provide appropriate support to address occupational and essential skills needs.

7.2 In most of the training sessions observed, the quality of the training and learning was good or better. Of the 73 training sessions seen, 18 (25%) were very good; 46 (63 %) were good; 8 (11%) were satisfactory and only one (1%) was inadequate. The training assessors and essential skills tutors are well prepared and use an effective range of strategies to engage the apprentices in their learning and develop their knowledge and understanding of their work-roles. They provide very good support and guidance, are flexible in their approach and are very aware of the individual needs of each of the apprentices. Most of the training assessors and tutors make good use of Ask ELLE and provide apprentices with additional materials to support their learning. A minority of the training sessions are, however, directed too tightly by the training assessors. As a result, there are insufficient opportunities for apprentices to reflect on, and record, the learning that has taken place.

There is a need for training assessors to have opportunities to enhance their pedagogic skills to provide increased levels of challenge and variety in the training sessions, promote the apprentices' use of information and learning technology, and enable them to develop further their capacity for independent learning.

7.3 There are good opportunities for apprentices to gain additional units and qualifications which exceed the requirements of their training frameworks. In retail, for example, a minority of the learners are targeting the new higher level Diploma which adds breadth to their training programmes and reflects accurately their roles, capabilities and aspirations. In addition to the apprentices whose essential skills are being targeted at levels higher than those required by their specific training framework, apprentices in other professional and technical areas have opportunities to take career enhancing additional units. A significant minority of the apprentices in hospitality and catering, for example, have the opportunity to undertake additional qualifications in the workplace, including first aid, food hygiene and customer service.

7.4 The provision for the essential skills of literacy and numeracy is very good and focuses not only on the assessment of previously acquired skills, but also on their development. The relationships between staff at all levels are effective in ensuring that the essential skills are integrated effectively into the professional and technical qualifications. The action-based activities are vocationally relevant and specific to the workplace of each apprentice.

7.5 There is a very good match between the workplace training, the apprentices' roles and responsibilities, and their target qualification. A systematic process is used at induction to secure a close match between units taken, particularly optional units, the available evidence opportunities, and the development and needs of the apprentice. The quality of most of the work placements is very good. There are good relationships with the apprentices' employers. The relationships with the workplace mentors are mostly very good; they have a well-developed understanding of the apprentices' training programmes. They are clear about their roles and responsibilities, well informed about the training programmes and most are involved fully in setting targets for, and reviewing the progress of, the apprentices across the training periods.

7.6 The quality of the personal training plans is inadequate. They are not sufficiently tailored to meet the personal, social or work-related development needs of individuals. As a result, they do not contain clearly defined targets and outcomes which will help prepare the trainees for progression to higher level training, further education or employment. In contrast, the quality of most of the personal learning plans, the documents used by Protocol Skills to identify the training needs of each apprentice, is good. They reflect well the individual needs of the apprentices and their progress towards their target qualifications. Where the personal training plans are supplemented by action plans and underpinned effectively by the learner review process, they provide excellent working documents which promote the effective integration of all of the components of the training programme. Where employers are offering additional training opportunities in the workplace, these are incorporated well into the personalised learning plans by the training assessors which avoids duplication and unnecessary repetition.

7.7 The procedures for assessment and internal verification, and for monitoring, tracking and reviewing apprentices' progress towards achievement of their frameworks are rigorous and robust. Most of the training assessors set clear learning objectives and the apprentices' progress is reviewed regularly. There is an appropriate use of 'fast tracking' for apprentices with high levels of previously acquired skill and competence. Good use is made of

technology to develop and record evidence, including mobile blackberry technology and wireless laptops. The portfolios are well-planned and very organised. In the interests of preparing apprentices for progression in their careers there is a need for assessors to require them to complete more written tasks, and encourage them to include a broader range of evidence, including product evidence and reflective accounts, in their portfolios.

7.8 While the majority of the training assessors discuss progression pathways with the apprentices the current arrangements for the provision of information advice and guidance are not sufficiently systematic to promote effective career-planning, or progression to higher levels of education and training.

7.9 Good links exist with an appropriate range of relevant external agencies. Apprentices whose personal barriers, for example, alcohol dependency, limit their progress towards completion of their qualifications or affect performance in the workplace are provided with good levels of support, including signposting to relevant agencies.

7.10 Protocol Skills promotes effectively the safeguarding of young people and vulnerable adults. Additional training in this area has been organised for staff and relevant managers. In the interests of good practice, Protocol Skills should amend their policies and procedures to make them specific to NI.

PART THREE

PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL AREA REPORTS

8. BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

8.1 In the professional and technical area inspected the quality of training provided by Protocol Skills is very good. The organisation is meeting very effectively the training and pastoral needs of the apprentices; and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

8.2 The main strengths are the:

- very good standards of work demonstrated and achieved by the apprentices in the workplace;
- very good match of the target qualifications with both the apprentices' and employers' training needs;
- good to very good quality of the directed training sessions;
- very good planning and organisation of the apprentices' training programme to facilitate their working patterns;
- rigorous arrangements for monitoring, reviewing and assessment of the apprentices' achievements and progress in workplace training; and
- good overall retention rate and excellent success rate at 85% and 100% respectively.

8.3 The main areas for improvement are the:

- advice and guidance provided for apprentices to promote and support their progression to higher level education and training programmes; and
- effective use of information and learning technology to support and improve the apprentices' independent learning.

Grade Awarded	Total No of Trainees
2	27

9. ESSENTIAL SKILLS

9.1 In the provision for essential skills the quality of training provided by Protocol Skills is very good. The organisation is meeting very effectively the training and pastoral needs of the apprentices; and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

9.2 The main strengths are the:

- excellent overall success rates at 100%;
- enthusiastic and motivated learners;

- good or better quality of teaching and learning by the essential skills tutors in most of the sessions observed;
- good use of findings from initial and diagnostic assessment to plan learning, and the relevant action-based activities specific to the workplace of each learner;
- very good links between essential skills tutors and the training assessors; and
- opportunities for apprentices to achieve essential skills levels beyond the requirements of their training frameworks.

The main area for improvement is the:

- low number of qualified essential skills tutors to support the apprentices.

Grade Awarded	Total No of Trainees
2	321 communication 341 numeracy

10. HOSPITALITY AND CATERING

10.1 In the professional and technical area inspected, the quality of training provided by Protocol Skills is very good. The organisation is meeting very effectively the training and pastoral needs of the apprentices; and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

10.2 The main strengths are the:

- very good leadership and management, which are effective in implementing a quality provision across the ApprenticeshipsNI programme;
- commitment and hard work of the training assessors;
- very good occupational skills demonstrated by most of the apprentices;
- very good engagement of employers in the training process;
- robust quality assurance and assessment procedures; and
- good overall retention and excellent success rates at 82% and 92% respectively.

10.3 The main area for improvement is the:

- provision of more opportunities for apprentices to participate in interactive learning and to undertake extended writing.

Grade Awarded	Total No of Trainees
2	246

11. RETAIL

11.1 In the professional and technical area inspected, the quality of training provided by Protocol Skills is very good. The organisation is meeting very effectively the training and pastoral needs of the apprentices; and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

11.2 The main strengths are the:

- very good planning and organisation of the provision; this reflects the training assessors' clear understanding of the apprentices' job roles, and their capacity to tailor the training programmes effectively to meet each apprentice's individual needs;
- enhancement of the already very good standards of work demonstrated by most of the apprentices as a consequence of their training;
- high levels of encouragement and support provided by the workplace mentors to the apprentices;
- excellent overall success rate at 95%; and
- robust assessment and related verification processes.

11.3 The main areas for improvement are the:

- development and planning for a wider range of learning techniques that engage the apprentices more actively in their own training; and
- provision of more opportunities for the training assessors to update and develop their occupational and pedagogic skills.

Grade

Grade Awarded	Total No of Trainees
2	198

12. TEAM LEADING

12.1 In the professional and technical area inspected, the quality of training provided by Protocol Skills is very good. The organisation is meeting very effectively the training and pastoral needs of the apprentices; and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

12.2 The main strengths are the:

- supportive, enthusiastic and flexible training assessors with good occupational competences and high expectations of the apprentices;
- mostly good or better quality of the individualised directed training sessions with good support and encouragement for the apprentices;

- consistently good work placements which are matched well to the apprentices' target framework, and the productive partnerships with employers and mentors;
- good retention and excellent success rates at 84% and 100% respectively;
- good range of resources to support the development of the apprentices' occupational competences and essential skills; and
- apprentices' good occupational skills and progress towards their target qualifications.

12.3 The main areas for improvement are the:

- planning for increased levels of challenge and variety in the training sessions; and
- breadth and range of evidence in the apprentices' portfolios.

Grade Awarded	Total No of Trainees
2	163

PART FOUR

13. CONCLUSION

13.1 In the professional and technical area inspected, the quality of the training provided by Protocol Skills is very good. The organisation is meeting very effectively the training and pastoral needs of the apprentices; and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

14. KEY PRIORITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

14.1 Protocol Skills needs to revise its annual development plan to take account of the following key priorities and further improve the quality of the training provision:

- the development and implementation of a range of appropriate opportunities to promote the continuous professional development of staff in their professional and technical areas, and enable them to develop further their skills in teaching, training and learning; and
- a formalised system for the identification and dissemination of information, advice and guidance on appropriate progression pathways within and across all apprenticeship programmes.

OVERALL SUMMARY TABLE – 2007-2010

Programme	Started (completed 4 weeks)	Retention Rate %	Success Rate %	Progressed to FE/other training	Progressed to relevant employment
Training for Success apprenticeships 2007 -2008	491	84	94	0	0
ApprenticeshipsNI 2008-2009	683	82	94	0	0
ApprenticeshipsNI 2009-2010	225	82	0	0	0
Overall totals		83	94	0	0

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