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- Retail NVQ/SVQ Assessment Strategy
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Assessment Strategy for NVQs and SVQs in the Retail Sector

1 Introduction

The strategies in this document were originally produced as an output of the assessment strategy project undertaken by the Distributive National Training Organisation in 2000/01¹. Nothing has changed in the retail industry that impacts on these original findings however these strategies have been further informed by the work of Skillsmart Retail and awarding bodies to provide flexible delivery methods. The formal introduction of these flexible arrangements by awarding bodies in 2005, as described in the fourth Key Principle, for larger retailers has been particularly successful and a number of retailers are now re-engaged with NVQ/SVQs.

In 2008 Skillsmart Retail published the Retail Sector Qualifications Strategy (SQS), which was developed in partnership with the awarding bodies, employers and regulators. To support full implementation of the SQS, the Assessment Strategy for NVQs and SVQs was amended so as to relax slightly the restrictions on the use of simulation as an assessment method. The Assessment Strategy now allows for simulation to be used to assess performance in a limited selection of basic functions which do not involve interaction with customers. However, it is still a key principle of the Assessment Strategy that assessment should be based on workplace activity, and in those limited circumstances where simulation is allowed it is still a strict requirement that the key characteristics of the working environment should be realistically simulated in relation to the function being assessed.

¹ The broad findings and recommendations of the assessment strategy project are contained in the document titled " Assessment strategy project findings and recommendations - incorporating the DNTO Assessment Strategy" and a full text of the findings and recommendations of the project titled "Skills formation and recognition of employees in the Distributive sector - findings and recommendations of the DNTO assessment strategy project".

2 Key Principles

A set of key principles have been firmly established over the past five years which inform the proposed assessment strategies and which should be used in interpreting their application. These principles are that:

Evidence of Competence is Based on Workplace Activity	NVQs and SVQs recognise competence in the workplace; as such evidence should reflect workplace activity and aim to reflect attainment within an organisational context.
Assessing National Occupational Standards and Related N/SVQ Levels	Assessment should assess the achievement of National Occupational Standards but must also ensure that the methods employed are those that are most relevant for the level being assessed and sector expectations of candidates at that level. For example, this means that, whilst observation should be the principle method to assess individuals at level 2, other methods like professional discussion and assignments might well be employed to assess individuals at levels 3 and above.
Developing a Skilled Workforce	Assessment practice should contribute to the development of a skilled workforce and the choice and application of assessment methods must reflect this ideal.
Integrating Systems for Capturing Evidence of Competence	Skills formation in the Retail sector, delivered through staff induction and ongoing training & development programmes, is required by organisations to capture the unique character and culture that the organisation wishes to project. To this end assessment systems for NVQs and SVQs should, where possible, be integrated with organisations' training and HR models for developing and recognising the competence of their workforce.

3 Assessment Strategies

3.1 The Use and Application of Simulation

In broad terms, the Retail sector holds the view that simulation is a practical and effective tool for establishing skill and understanding, where naturally occurring evidence of competence is unavailable or infrequent. However the sector feels that there is very little that can be assessed by simulation with the exception of:

- some aspects of Health & Safety and Security, and
- some basic functions which do not involve interaction with customers.

Skillsmart Retail requires that Awarding Bodies:

- a Discourage the inappropriate use of NVQs and SVQs by organisations that do not assess candidates in a working environment. NVQ/SVQs are only suitable for individuals who are in some form of working capacity in the sector, or, in a limited set of contexts, are being prepared for work and will be assessed in a realistic working environment (see section 3.1.1 below for definition).

- b Establish criteria to ensure that simulation is not used as the sole form of evidence for any unit of an NVQ or SVQ, except where allowed for specific units in Section 3.2 of this Assessment Strategy. This should be expressed in guidance for qualifications operating in the sector.
- c Provide clear guidance to centres to indicate that evidence towards an NVQ or SVQ should come from the workplace except where simulation is expressly allowed in the evidence requirements for a particular unit. Workplace evidence may be gathered in the context of full, part-time, casual or voluntary employment. Assessment may be undertaken in a 'work placement' (i.e. fulltime students placed into a working environment for a day per week) although supporting evidence from a supervisor or manager, associated with some form of work activity must supplement the assessment process.

3.1.1 Providing Realistic Working Environments (RWE)

Where simulation is used the sector requires that:

- a Simulation must be undertaken in a Realistic Working Environment
- b Awarding Bodies provide guidance for centres, which requires that Realistic Working Environments:

"provide an environment which replicates the key characteristics of the workplace in which the skill to be assessed is normally employed".

A realistic working environment (for the purpose of simulated work activities) is regarded as one that replicates a real working environment. For example, a college shop that operates on a commercial basis (i.e. it has a profit and loss account) is acceptable for retail environments but a shop laid out in a classroom environment isn't. However, simulated activity may be used within a retail setting itself, for assessment purposes in order to prevent any barriers to achievement.

3.2 Standards which are required to be assessed through performance

Assessment for the NVQ/SVQ must always be carried out in a retail environment except where a realistic working environment is permitted for simulation.

The use of simulated activities is allowed for:

- the demonstration of emergency procedures contained within the Health & Safety Units (E2, E6, E18);
- taking action to deal with or contain security risks, threats & breaches and incidents of theft within the Security Units (E1, E7, E11)
- units covering a limited selection of basic functions which need not involve interacting with customers (B1, B2, C1, E1, E2, E3, E4).

Additionally Improve SSC allow for the use of simulation as a **supplementary form of evidence** for Units B17, B18 and B19 when the candidate's assessment environment does not allow for assessment across the full range of contexts, equipment or products specified.

Evidence generated from simulated activities will not be acceptable for any other unit. In particular, it must be emphasised that **simulation is not permitted** for any of the units originally derived by the:

- Institute of Customer Service (ICS)
- Management Standards Centre (MSC)
- Financial Services Skills Council (FSSC)

3.3 The Role and Competence of Assessors, Expert Witnesses and Verifiers

A wide variety of issues impact upon the participation of organisations and take-up by individuals, of NVQs and SVQs. These issues relate to other matters as well as the quality of an assessment process, however, they are central to the way assessment is managed.

To this end, Skillsmart Retail requires that the following conditions be fulfilled.

3.3.1 The Role of Supervisors and Managers in the Assessment Process

The principle is established that, wherever possible, assessment is conducted by colleagues, supervisors and/or managers in a workplace environment. Where the skill or capability of these individuals is inadequate to deliver the requirements of the organisation or the quality infrastructure, external services (to the work unit or organisation) may be introduced (peripatetic assessors). If the candidate is employed in the Retail sector, in no circumstances may an NVQ or SVQ for the Retail sector be delivered without the involvement of the candidate's line manager or the owner/manager to confirm the candidate's competence.

Where in-store line managers carry out the assessment or internal verification roles, retail stores with the agreement of their awarding body may choose between:

- a achieving the appropriate regulatory body approved unit qualifications for assessment and internal verification

OR

- b demonstrating that the company's training and development activity undertaken to prepare, validate and review these assessment / verification roles, maps 100% to the National Occupational Standards which these qualifications are based on. The mapping process **must be agreed** by the awarding body as providing the equivalent level of rigour and robustness as the achievement of the unit qualification.

The alternative option described in (b) above, which waives the need for the regulatory approved units in the Retail Sector, must be confined in application to an 'organisation by organisation' and 'qualification by qualification' basis. **Prospective organisations must be able to confirm that their in-house practices conform to the requirements of the standards in association with the prospective awarding body who will be offering the qualification.**

3.3.2 The Role of Peripatetic Assessors / Internal Verifiers in the Assessment Process

Peripatetic assessors and internal verifiers must hold or be working towards the appropriate regulatory body approved qualifications for assessment and internal verification.

The services offered by the peripatetic assessor must complement the activity of a line manager or owner/manager and the competence of a candidate employed in the Retail sector may not be confirmed without the participation of a line manager or owner/manager in the process. It is also requested that specific reference be made to auditing this provision, within external verification processes.

3.3.3 The Role of Expert Witnesses in the Assessment Process

There are a number of different sub sectors in retail selling a huge range of products. Consequently there are occupations within the retail store which are undertaken by specialists e.g. beauty consultants, bakers and visual merchandisers. These specialist occupations are reflected in the retail National Occupational Standards which means that in many cases assessors will not be competent in performing the occupational requirements of the standards.

In these instances the assessor **must use** an expert witness² to provide evidence in confirming to the candidate's competence. The assessor will make the final judgement.

3.3.4 Occupational Competence of Expert Witnesses

Expert witnesses can be drawn from a wide range of people who can attest to performance in the workplace, including line managers and experienced colleagues from inside the candidate's organisation. Skillsmart Retail requires that:

"Expert witnesses must be able to demonstrate practical experience and knowledge in the unit being assessed."

It is unlikely that a person could become a full expert in less than six to twelve months of being employed in the retail sector. However a person could become expert in a unit very quickly if this was the focus of their job role e.g. preparing fresh produce for sale. The assessor should make a judgement as to the level of expertise held by the expert witness and where necessary confirm this with a member of the store management team.

3.3.5 Occupational Competence of Assessors

Skillsmart Retail requires that:

"Assessors are required to be Competent in performing the occupational requirements of the retail generic standards, in terms of performance and knowledge, and also demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of both the generic and specialist standards they are assessing."

² An expert witness is an experienced peer of the candidate, or the candidate's line manager. The expert witness is not consulted as a professional assessor, but as someone who is expert in the occupation to be assessed.

The acquisition of this competence will have been gained either from direct employment in the same occupational role as the national occupational standards or in an operational supervisory, managerial or in-company trainer position of employees carrying out this role."

Skillsmart Retail requirements for the occupational competence of assessors in the retail industry is that they must have worked in a retail company either as a retail assistant, as a supervisor/team leader/manager or as an in-company trainer of retail assistants.

It is unlikely that retail assistants would have achieved occupational competence in less than twelve months, or less than six months if employed in a managerial position, but individuals with less experience could be considered as assessors if sufficiently occupationally competent.

3.3.6 Occupational Competence of Verifiers

Skillsmart Retail requires that:

***"Internal Verifiers** are required to have a current Understanding of the content, structure and occupational requirements of the standards that they are internally verifying. The acquisition of this understanding will have been gained while working directly within the retail occupational area in either an operational or a support function.*

The level of understanding should be sufficient to allow them to make a judgement as to whether the assessor has fully assessed candidates against all the performance and knowledge evidence requirements for the national occupational standards."

It is unlikely that a person could have gained this level of understanding in less than six months of being employed in the retail sector, but individuals with less experience could be considered as Internal Verifiers if they have the required level of understanding.

***"External Verifiers** are required to have a current Understanding of the occupational requirements of the standards they are verifying. The acquisition of this understanding will have been gained while working within the occupational area in either an operational or a support function.*

The level of understanding should enable them to relate to and understand the requirements of the national occupational standards and be sufficient to enable them to determine whether the evidence collected for a candidate met all the evidence requirements."

It is unlikely that a person could have gained this level of understanding in less than six months of being employed in the retail sector, but individuals with less experience could be considered as External Verifiers if they have the required level of understanding.

3.3.7 Continuing Professional Development of Peripatetic Assessors and Verifiers

The sector also requires that individuals involved in these activities maintain currency of skill and understanding of the sector, in line with the role they are fulfilling. It is a Skillsmart Retail requirement that guidance on Continuous Professional Development of peripatetic assessors and verifiers must be implemented, in that:

"All assessors and verifiers, if not currently employed within the a Retail industry sector company, will need to prove they have a current working knowledge of the sector they are assessing or verifying. This can be demonstrated by maintaining records of evidence from occupational updating activities such as:

- *Internal or external work experience*
- *Internal or external work shadowing opportunities*
- *Other relevant CPD activities with the prior approval of the awarding bodies"*

Note: Retailers who have chosen not to use the appropriate regulatory body approved qualifications for assessment and internal verification should be encouraged to offer the unit qualifications as CPD where the willingness by the employer to support this additional activity becomes known to the awarding body.

3.4 External Quality Control of Assessment - Risk Identification and Management

The application and implementation of external quality control (i.e. independent assessment, external moderation, tests and projects) was thoroughly researched during the project and the main report² (section 6) details the reasons sector employers felt it was considered neither feasible nor practical. The rationale supported by employers was that a robust quality system is based upon processes associated with risk assessment and management.

The awarding body's risk rating system must be auditable by the regulatory bodies.

3.4.1 Risk Identification

In order to achieve the required level of external quality control, the awarding body must undertake a risk assessment of **each** prospective centre at the point of **application for approval to offer any Skillsmart Retail qualification**. The awarding body must obtain information on a number of specified 'risk factors' for each prospective centre at the point of approval. Skillsmart Retail would recommend the following, but Awarding Bodies should feel free to recommend alternative risk factors, which would be more appropriate.

- Prospective centres' experience of operating NVQs or SVQs.
- The appropriateness of existing systems, or systems developed to meet the requirements of other quality assurance regimes, for the delivery of NVQs or SVQs.
- Whether the prospective centre has had a previous application for centre approval refused or their approval status withdrawn.
- The proposed ratio of candidates to assessors and internal verifiers, taking account of whether the assessors and internal verifiers are full-time or part-time in their roles.

² "Skills formation and recognition of employees in the Distributive sector: findings and recommendations of the DNT0 assessment strategy project" (1st November 2000)

- Whether candidates are going to be in employment (paid or voluntary), on work placements or learning in a realistic working environment (see section 3.1.1 for definition).

The awarding body must have a **method of rating** the prospective centre against each of the risk factors noted above and, also, producing an overall rating which identifies the level of risk associated with the prospective centre. The rating should then be used by the awarding body in determining the degree of support during the first year of approval.

3.4.2 Risk Management

In order to identify and manage risk during ongoing centre operation, the awarding body must undertake a **yearly risk assessment of each active centre for the Retail sector NVQs or SVQs**. The awarding body must obtain information on a number of specified 'risk factors' for each centre. Skillsmart Retail would recommend the following, but Awarding Bodies should feel free to recommend alternative risk factors, which would be more appropriate.

- The turnover of assessors and internal verifiers.
- The throughput of candidates.
- The ratio of candidates to assessors and internal verifiers, taking account of whether the assessors and internal verifiers are full-time or part-time in their roles.
- Whether public funding is being accessed for the training of candidates towards/assessment of candidates for the NVQs or SVQs.
- Whether candidates are in employment (paid or voluntary), on work placements or learning in a realistic working environment (see section 3.1.1 for definition).

The awarding body must have a **method of rating** each centre against each of the risk factors noted above and, also, producing an overall rating which identifies the level of risk associated with the centre. The rating should then be used by the awarding body to assist in determining the level of ongoing support for the centre, including the level of external verification activity.

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