

Smart Training and Recruitment Ltd



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Assessment Information

Assessment Type	Accreditation Review
Assessor's Decision	Standard Met
Assessor's Name	Kevin Smith
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Continuous Improvement Check Year 1 due by	28/10/21
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Accreditation Review onsite visit to be conducted by	28/10/23

Organisation – Introduction, Aims, Objectives and Outcomes

Smart Training and Recruitment is a private vocational training provider based in Newport, Isle of Wight but operating across most of the English regions for the best part of the last two decades. Smart offers apprenticeships to the employees of Levy and non-Levy paying companies and will also place learners using resources such as the Indeed website to recruit at intermediate, advanced and higher levels. Management level courses at Level 3 and Level 5 are gaining in popularity. The sectors in which Smart operates include hospitality and catering, business administration, customer service, business improvement techniques, team leading, management, health and social care, and retail, with over 800 current apprentices, and a further 100 learners supported by Advanced Learner Loans. Due to the impact of the Levy reforms there has been a reduction in apprenticeships. A growing area is the provision of traineeships for increasing employability, although as most of the placements are in British Heart Foundation charity shops, the lockdown has created a temporary obstacle. Smart is applying for additional funding under the Kickstart Scheme, and currently there are about 50 trainees. A dedicated Functional Skills service is integrated with the rest of its delivery, for English and maths qualifications at Levels 1 and 2. As direct funded by the ESFA, Smart was subject to Ofsted inspection in 2017 and rated 'Good', and has been **matrix** accredited since 2005.

Smart was relatively well-placed to cope with the impact of lockdown. It had invested in a new Microsoft package in December 2019 which included Teams, not realising then the significance of the function until moving to remote delivery within a few short months. A senior Director who was in Spain in February saw the early onset of coronavirus and alerted colleagues in the UK to what was coming and to understand the likely effect on the business. A Covid strategy was put in place prior to the March lockdown which initially meant all apprenticeship recruitment stopped, some apprentices becoming redundant and many Smart staff were furloughed. Just before the lockdown started a new relationship had been made with a care home to provide online learning, and that proved a crucial bridgehead in order for the company to maintain activity. Since July when general operations resumed, there has been an increase in recruitment, based on maintaining strong employer contact and active engagement with their plans for Levy funds.

The lockdown changed the way Smart operates, and a previous regional structure was abolished in favour of a unitary form of line management and closer team co-operation. There were some redundancies in the process of restructuring. Two main teams provide delivery at Smart. The Business Development Team (BDT) is sometimes referred to by colleagues as having a sales function due to their business growth remit. They provide the initial contact by Smart with employers and also individual learners who enquire about courses, and it was clear that information, advice and guidance (IAG) is key to their role. With employers, the BDT builds and maintains relationships over time to understand and meet the training needs of their workforce. A separate team of Training Advisors (TA's) deliver the courses once a learner has 'on-boarded' following recruitment. The TA's teach the course, although as their job title suggests, they also have a responsibility for (IAG). This includes preparing learners for the EPA¹ as part of Standards. Providing line management is an intermediate management group who liaise between teams to co-ordinate a seamless service particularly during the initial assessment as part of on-boarding. Among these managers are Quality Leads and a Functional Skills Lead. Providing strategic oversight of the business is a Senior Leadership Team (SLT) of Directors who head up areas such as HR, Operations, Business Development and also Quality, Data & Compliance.

¹ End Point Assessment

IAG at Smart is defined in multiple documented sources. Firstly, a policy outlines the principles that govern delivery of IAG, written in terms for all its 'Advisors' providing a service to all its 'clients'. Its latest revision was in October 2020. The principles include that the IAG should be Accessible, and points to the live chat function included in the Smart website. It defines a minimum Level 2 qualification for all Advisors, and staff from both the main teams confirmed this was part of the training for the role. Local Knowledge is a principle that was discussed in interviews with the BDT, in light of their change from a regional and travel focus to working from home during lockdown. This change has generally resulted in a more efficient operation according to team members and local knowledge is now shared within the team based on the location of employers they are working with. The Policy states recognisable principles of Diversity, Impartiality, and states the PREVENT duty, as areas of compliance for Smart staff. A Learner Handbook provides an accessible account of the IAG service at the start of the introduction to all aspects of apprenticeships. Appropriately, it includes a learner's employer as part of the support during an apprenticeship, and relates the IAG to national standards while ensuring it is individually-relevant and fit for the needs of the job. Some managers referred to the Work-based Learning Procedures as a source for IAG, and the document seen covers the detailed content for each stage of the learner journey: Pre-Start; Validation (during which an initial assessment is undertaken); On-going learning; Assessment; Completion; and Learner Exit.

The Directors of Smart have highlighted their top objectives, as relevant to IAG for the current year, in the context of general strategic development. These 5 objectives are as follows: -

- To provide impartial and reliable IAG (to employers and learners) from on-boarding to exit
- To utilise social media platforms and online presence to promote opportunities
- To undertake robust analysis of employer and learner feedback
- To further develop resources at the 'front-end' of the learner journey
- To build communication with staff to strengthen engagement during pressures arising from the pandemic

All staff were able to describe in detail the IAG provided at each stage of the learner journey. Information to employers is made available on the Smart website, where the menu provides options according to whether 'I am a learner', or 'I am a parent', or 'I am an employer'. The latter selection opens a page on 'What is an apprenticeship?' and other Frequently Asked Questions. Such common issues as the requirement for Off-the-Job training are addressed, with more, in-depth 'Myth-busting' fact sheets attached to allay potential concerns. Factsheets have also been produced for the specific qualifications offered, e.g. Level 5 Operations Manager. A recently revised on-boarding process includes an initial assessment that means all learners are tested for literacy and numeracy. A skills scan is carried out, with the involvement of the employer. British Values are introduced in a 'side-by-side' certificate delivered during induction. The Functional Skills Lead works with the TA's to embed maths and English in the curriculum, with an emphasis on building communication skills and confidence to maintain practical relevance. For maths the tutor uses coronavirus graphs as a topical study aid. Referral can be made to specialist support, e.g. in the case of dyscalculia. A target has been set in the QIP² to ensure 90% learners achieve their Functional Skills within 9 months to drive improvement.

The TA's perform regular reviews of learner progress while on course, recording updates on OneFile and discussing in team meetings. The Quality Leads audit the quality of IAG through standardisation and line management. Learners say they are well-informed about their progress and that the course

² Quality Improvement Plan

is delivered with relevance to their work situation and career aims. Meanwhile employers interviewed referred to the importance of IAG from the BDT, to both support and to challenge the basis for their decision-making. Learners can continue to access support after they exit the course. The reliability of IAG over the duration of the journey contributes to the success rates projected at between 65% - 74% in the current year, although under pressure from coronavirus and the move to Standards. The 2019 ESFA³ survey referred to recommendation rates of 91% by employers and 85% by learners.

Employers in the partner interviews particularly praised the “*account management*” aspect of working with Smart, and that it “*suggests the right values are in place*”. Smart understands the needs of employers and considerable leadership has been invested in this aspect of the business development – the addition of short accredited courses on offer was one example. “*Out of 49 training providers we work with I would place Smart in the top 2*”. For the traineeships the BDT works with third party agencies to attract learners, placing an emphasis on networking and drawing on other sources of support. Traineeship Achievement Analysis spreadsheets show a year on year increase in all positive outcomes.

Smart operates a Facebook page with social media an area which Smart seeks to refresh via the adoption of new platforms, e.g. Tik Tok. Among the employers interviewed there was a strong advocacy to push further with the online developments, while keeping a personable approach. This year the ESFA has not undertaken its learner and employer surveys, however Smart made its own survey in July. These show a good proportion of responses and address topical issues such as the preference for online or face-to-face delivery - evenly split in the survey of learners, although the great majority were of the view that they have benefitted from continuing with their course online. Employer feedback was also very positive, although some comments highlighted that digital skill deficit can form a barrier for some of their staff. While some learners interviewed said they were able to make more progress with their studies while at home during lockdown, in the survey there were comments from others that found being away from the work-setting a disadvantage. A PowerPoint demonstrated how the surveys have been analysed by Smart managers, and Smart advertises the 5-star rating that the provider has on the Apprenticeship Directory.

Nearly all learners interviewed said they were introduced to Smart by their employer. An impression that Smart was “*well-organised*” was part of what appealed and the quality of induction was acknowledged by just about all interviewees, with 93% satisfaction recorded in the current SAR⁴ for the areas of statutory compliance covered. Smart has developed a 3 stage on-boarding process which culminates in a handover from the BDT to a learner’s TA. At Smart “*it feels like it is all about the learner*”, in their perception. BDT members referred to the resources they are able to draw on to provide additional support (such as Mind website, for mental health issues, or local careers advisers) and with traineeship learners a willingness to signpost to help with barriers such as homelessness. With apprenticeships the BDT plays a key role to help employers understand their role in supporting learners, to which the surveys attest, including for health and safety and OJT⁵ requirement – the latter a focus for improvement. Attendance on course is good and the number of potential early leavers is carefully monitored in order to intervene and minimise, with a 70% benchmark figure. In the year until summer, a figure of 83% retention was achieved, a drastic improvement following the changes to on-boarding. Since then rates have slightly declined under the impact of the coronavirus.

Staff communications have received more attention during the pandemic. Regular email updates have been issued by the MD to all staff, at work and furloughed, mindful of values of honesty and

³ Education & Skills Funding Agency

⁴ Self-Assessment Report

⁵ Off the Job Training

integrity when dealing with some of the issues arising with lockdown. The introduction of Teams has enhanced communication for colleagues who have always been dispersed across different regions. The SLT has met weekly to provide clear leadership to the staff as was acknowledged during interviews. At middle-management levels there was a role to co-ordinate across the different teams, as demonstrated by the TA's following up on 'outstanding actions' on the Employer Monitoring Forms. A recently appointed HR Director has initiated focus groups among staff to strengthen their voice, and it is planned to roll out further themed focus groups in December. Learners consistently praised their relationship with their TA as key to a positive learning experience, while employers noted the low turnover of TA's that can have a negative impact.

Individual learner goals are decided at the start of the apprenticeship or traineeship and outcomes assessed in terms of progression and destinations. As with some other measures, the impact of coronavirus has had to be taken into account, with managers placing less reliance on pay rises as a way of gauging success. However, 42% were recorded as gaining additional responsibility or promotion following their course; but only 11% going onto study another qualification. The latter figure represents a far lower rate than two years previously and this is attributed to funding limitations and a lack of employer support. After the work to improve the resources to attract and recruit learners, the progression to higher levels of study is identified in the SAR as an area next in need of improvement. The desire is there among learners and it is discussed in reviews although the EPA tends to dominate towards the end of the course. *"It has opened up a new pathway of career choices"*. In reviews TA's will often include topical issues such as Black Lives Matter or 'County Lines' crime, thus helping to embed British Values. Also discussed are the 'soft skills' which learners acknowledged in their interviews, such as adapting to change, transferable learning, and time management. For traineeships the young people may start the course as NEET⁶, so providing a baseline for measuring outcomes. 48% change their NEET status, above the national average for traineeships. The relationship-building with apprentices is important for deepening the sense of personal growth and rounded development. As well as growth in confidence, learners say *"now delegating and decision-making come easier"* and *"I'm much more aware of how colleagues perceive me and my communications"*.

⁶ Not in Employment, Education or Training

Strengths

Two areas of strength were identified during the assessment, which are detailed below. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criteria of the **matrix** Standard.

- The Learner Handbook (for apprenticeships) stands out among its kind as a well written, accessible publication, that makes plain the IAG offered. Among the attractive features are an illustrated foreword from the MD which gives a personal welcome and accountability for Smart Training, something learners felt was open and transparent in case of any problems. Later in the Handbook a complaints and appeals process have a section. In an easy on the eye layout and narrative the Handbook unpacks such commonly assumed terminology as 'Initial Assessment' and 'Individual Learning Plan', taking the reader through a learner journey on the page. It covers resources such as OneFile and ForSkills (for diagnosis of Functional Skills needs) and lastly in the first section, commits Smart to providing opportunity to explore careers options by the end of the apprenticeship. Subsequent sections provide an in-depth explanation of areas of compliance and best practice such working safely, Safeguarding, Equality & Diversity, and the Prevent Duty. In relation to the workplace, such concepts as 'victimisation', 'harassment' and 'bullying' receive a paragraph apiece; linked to this is a section on British Values. The 9 legally Protected Characteristics are detailed, with references included for contact and support. During interviews, learners had a strong grasp of these areas and were able to apply them to their work situation. [1.4, 3.1, 3.5]
- The positive and open culture created by the leadership at Smart was confirmed. Staff felt the difficult period of lockdown and 're-sizing' was handled as well as could be expected, with potential controversies such as redundancy favourably compared by colleagues with their experience elsewhere. Some staff have left and returned to work at Smart, noting the higher level of professionalism which is demonstrated by the quality of reliable data shared with teams. Induction of new staff – even during the difficult lockdown period – was credited with being properly planned and more comprehensive than elsewhere. *"Everyone senior is accessible."* [1.2, 2.5, 4.7]

Areas for Development

Areas for development are offered in the spirit of continuous improvement and a way for an Assessor to add value e.g. where the service is of a high quality, development areas are offered to help the service be even better than it already is, or to give insight into practices seen elsewhere. There is no correlation between the number of strengths and areas for development. Where development areas are greater in number this is not intended to indicate that the information, advice and guidance service is in any way lacking. These will form the basis for discussion at the Continuous Improvement Checks (CIC) conducted twelve and twenty-four months from the date of this Assessment, along with any other notable developments. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criteria of the **matrix** Standard.

- The focus groups which have started on cross-cutting subjects such as Communications were often referred to by staff and are producing a higher level of engagement between teams. A group to facilitate internal networking with an agenda to consider IAG could have a number of benefits. The team contains the first-hand experience of former apprentices and trainees that is an asset for understanding the role of IAG. It would enable the sharing of resources, such as those used for signposting by the BDT, and harmonise approaches. More pointedly it would be an ideal forum to review how IAG is defined for both employers and learners, and if traineeships expand it could consider the form and delivery IAG should take. Employers are relying more on Smart for their IAG needs and they say, “*Be a partner – challenge us*”. One example of where that challenge could be made is with Functional Skills – employers do not always support the need for it as part of the apprenticeship and yet the skills are very relevant in sectors such as hospitality, so it might be a matter of its presentation within an IAG context. Lastly, the forum could assist management in setting annual priorities for IAG in line with the strategic and business objectives. [1,1, 1.7, 3.1]
- As already acknowledged, Smart generates and makes significant use of data as a strength of the service to analyse delivery and performance and for continuous improvement. Individual developmental goals are explored with learners and recorded in ILPs. The annual SAR is heavy on detail but not arranged in a way that presents the data in an accessible format. Some tables would help to provide trend analysis or comparison with national benchmarks. At present it is buried in the narrative. Smart managers are intending to change the format of the SAR by next year. This could be the opportunity to include more of the soft outcomes as part of the progression measures, highlighting the transferability of learning that can be applied in different settings – something in which employers expressed an interest. [4.1, 4.2, 4.4]
- ICT is referred to in connection with other Functional Skills as a recognised need but the provision needs further resourcing. Managers at Smart are discussing this, as a barrier that is emerging with the advent of remote learning. Investment in this area could enable more learners to avail of opportunities and employers might also consider resourcing to be worthwhile for the efficiency of their business. [1.5, 3.5, 4.7]

The annual **matrix** Continuous Improvement Check will allow the organisation to demonstrate on an ongoing basis the developments they are continuing to make in order to support individuals. These may include the Areas for Development above. <https://matrixstandard.com/assessment-journey/continuous-improvement-checks/>

Please note that annual Continuous Improvement Checks are mandatory and non-completion within the required timescale will impact on your organisation’s accreditation, please see the section Assessment Information for dates.

Methodology

The following methods were used to gather evidence against the **matrix** Standard during the assessment process.

30 staff interviewed – including 5 Directors, 2 team managers, a Functional Skills Lead and Business Development analyst, 10 Training Advisors, 3 Quality Leads, 6 members of the BDT, and 2 administrative and data analysts.

3 employer partners interviewed

15 learners were interviewed

Documentary evidence included the website, database, SAR, QIP, Learner Handbook, Work-based Procedures, Employer Monitoring forms, factsheets, and IAG Policy

Conditions of Accreditation

Holders of the **matrix** Standard Accreditation must:

1. Maintain and continually improve upon their services.
2. Throughout the period of accreditation satisfy The Growth Company that the organisation continues to meet the requirements of the **matrix** Standard via the annual continuous improvement checks and the three-year accreditation review.
3. Complete annual continuous improvement checks in a timely way, it is expected these will be carried out annually by the accreditation anniversary date.
4. Inform The Growth Company or their Assessor if the key contact name/contact details change.
5. Submit their Booking Form for re-accreditation to the **matrix** Standard at least 3 months prior to the accreditation anniversary date ensuring all pre on-site activity is completed in a timely way including planning, payment and interview scheduling. Accreditation Reviews are due 3 years from the anniversary accreditation date; it is expected that organisations will be assessed by this date or will risk being de-accredited.
6. Inform The Growth Company of any significant changes made to the organisational structure, senior management or systems that may impact on their accreditation; email: matrixStandard@growthco.uk.
7. Inform The Growth Company immediately if they wish to extend or reduce the scope of their accreditation.
8. Inform The Growth Company of any serious complaint or rise in numbers of complaints received (within the scope of the accreditation).
9. Not undertake or omit to undertake any activity that may be misleading and/or may cause The Growth Company and/or the **matrix** Standard to be brought into disrepute.
10. Only use the **matrix** Standard Quality Mark for the areas within the scope of the accreditation and in accordance with the guidelines. For example, if a certain department is successfully **matrix** accredited, the Quality Mark can only be used on that department's letterhead or on that department's page on their internet homepage.
11. Ensure in cases where accreditation is withdrawn or where they do not come forward for accreditation review, remove from display any certificates or plaques issued by The Growth Company and do not display the **matrix** Standard Quality Mark nor refer to be a former holder of the **matrix** Standard.
12. Be aware that The Growth Company reserves the right to remove any accreditation and/or certification previously applied if payment is not received for services provided.