

# **Athlone Association for the Blind**

**EVALUATION:**

**CALL CENTRE YOUTH TRAINING PROJECT**

**Commissioned by**

**SWISS-SOUTH AFRICAN CO-OPERATION INITIATIVE  
(SSACI)**

**26 JULY 2004**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report outlines the outcome of an evaluation, which was commissioned by the Swiss-South African Co-Operation Initiative (SSACI). The purpose of the evaluation was address the following questions:

1. Within the contract period, did the implementers do what they said they were going to?
2. Was the programme implemented properly in terms of curriculum, methodology, educational value and compatibility with the principles of the NQF?
3. Have the objectives/outputs been achieved?
4. What lessons can be learned?

The approach to the review was participative, with dialogue as the key means of data collection. In addition, documents and reports were reviewed, and time was spent at the Athlone School for the Blind, observing training, as well as in the Insights Call Centre.

The findings indicate that the training programme is sound, and that although the outputs will not be achieved within the specified contract period, they should be achieved shortly after its conclusion. The key recommendations relate to addressing institutional issues, viz.

- the relationship between the Athlone Association for the Blind and the training provider (Quality Solutions)
- changing the legal identity of the training provider from a commercial to a not-for-profit entity.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This review would not have been possible without the kind co-operation of Melanie Bailes and Audrey Knight, the members of Quality Solutions, as well as Brian Notcutt, Chief Executive Officer of the Athlone Association for the Blind, and manager of this project.

Last, but by no means least, I must thank the learners and "graduates" who volunteered and/or agreed to be interviewed. Although some of them face unique challenges in a sighted world, what they see is valuable, and I wish them every success in their endeavours.

Fiona Cameron-Brown  
26 July 2004

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## INTRODUCTION

The Swiss-South African Co-operation Initiative (SSACI) contracted **FIONA CAMERON CONSULTING (FCC)** to evaluate the following project:

- Training 84 previously disadvantaged youths with the necessary skills and opportunities to obtain employment within the call-centre industry.
- Establishing a call-centre at the Athlone School for the Blind that can generate funds for ongoing training by providing an outsourced call-centre facility for local companies.

This final report incorporates the information and findings presented in the interim report; it incorporates comments from Brian Notcutt, additional information provided by Quality Solutions, and at the request of Ken Duncan, Programme Manager, SSACI, addresses a number of the institutional problems that were identified. It concludes with a series of recommendations.

### The brief

In terms of the consultant's brief from SSACI, the evaluation had to address four key questions:

1. Did the project achieve the objectives:
  - (a) to provide 84 previously-disadvantaged youths with the necessary skills and opportunities to obtain employment within the call-centre industry; and
  - (b) to establish a call-centre at Athlone School that can generate funds for ongoing training by providing an outsourced call-centre facility for local companies?
2. Was the training programme implemented properly in terms of curriculum, methodology, educational value, practicality, and compatibility with the principles of NQF (including registered standards and/or qualifications)?
3. Have those inputs led to the desired outputs?
  - (a) How many youths were trained?
  - (b) On completion of training, how many have been placed in employment?
  - (c) Who employs them, and what do they do?
  - (d) What do they earn, and do they have prospects for permanent employment?
4. What can SSACI and the Athlone Association for the Blind/Quality Solutions learn from the
  - (a) strengths and successes of the project to date? What have been the weaknesses and failures? How can we account for them?
  - (b) lessons from this project that could inform the planning and implementation of similar projects in future?

Within this framework, the departure point was the project description, as provided by SSACI, specifically:

*During 2003, Athlone Association for the Blind will recruit and select 84 youths from historically-disadvantaged communities, in seven groups of twelve, to undergo training as call-centre operators.*

*Each group will undergo six months of full-time, contact training in generic call-centre skills before being placed in a six-month internship in a functioning call centre, as required by SSETA's training unit standards for call-centre operators. The contact training will be provided by a commercial contractor, Quality Solutions*

*....*

*The call-centre within which the internship is served may be operated by Athlone itself or by a commercial company. During this internship, learners will be given industry-specific knowledge and assisted to develop their practical skills. During the internship, Athlone will make monthly monitoring visits to each intern.*

*On completion of the internship, trainees will be assisted to find jobs within the call-centre industry. It is anticipated that at least 60 of the trainees will be employed on a commercial basis within 3 months of completion of the total training programme.*

### **Terms used in this report**

For ease of understanding, and to distinguish between the different participants in the programme, the following terms are used:

- **Learner**—a participant in the learning programme—theoretical component.
- **Agent**—a "graduate" working in the Insights Call Centre, who has completed his/her theoretical training, but is on a learnership (completing practical training).
- **Graduate**—an individual who has successfully completed the call centre training that s/he attended through Athlone Association, and who may or may not be employed.

### **The Process**

Given both SSACI and the evaluator's intention that an evaluation can be an opportunity for constructive dialogue, qualitative and quantitative data were collected using a participative approach. The process included the following:

1. Paper based review of reports, class lists, and other information provided by the Athlone Association for the Blind and Quality Solutions.
2. Interviews and discussions with:
  - (a) the Project Manager (Athlone Association for the Blind) and trainers (Quality Solutions);
  - (b) learners and agents in the training currently under way and/or working in the Insights Call Centre;
  - (c) graduates of training completed prior to this evaluation; and
  - (d) where possible, employers.
3. Observation of the training currently underway, and a scan of learning support materials.

## FINDINGS

The findings comprise a combination of demographic information, data collected through interviews, and insights gathered through observation and discussion.

### The Athlone Association call centre learner

It would appear that the majority of learners in the course originate from greater Cape Town, although some do come from further a field, e.g. Johannesburg, Atlantis and Port Elizabeth. In general, though, these blind/partially blind candidates are products of the Athlone Association for the blind. It seems that the isiXhosa<sup>1</sup> and isiZulu speakers view Cape Town as home, although they do retain some links with the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu Natal, respectively.

An analysis of the racial makeup of the learners indicates a profile that generally reflects that of the Western Cape. However, the proportion of women and disabled (blind/partially blind) learners is somewhat greater than would usually be expected in the general population. This is largely the effect of

- the course operating out of the Athlone School for the Blind;
- that women are generally more interested in people-oriented careers than men.

The table below is a provides a summary of the demographic characteristics:

|                 |    |      | <b>Blind</b> | <b>%</b> | <b>P/S</b> | <b>%</b> | <b>F</b> | <b>%</b> | <b>M</b> | <b>%</b> |
|-----------------|----|------|--------------|----------|------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <b>Asian</b>    | 2  | 2%   | 0            | 0%       | 1          | 1%       | 1        | 1%       | 1        | 1%       |
| <b>Black</b>    | 39 | 46%  | 2            | 2%       | 4          | 5%       | 31       | 37%      | 8        | 10%      |
| <b>Coloured</b> | 40 | 48%  | 10           | 12%      | 18         | 21%      | 22       | 26%      | 18       | 21%      |
| <b>White</b>    | 3  | 4%   | 1            | 1%       | 0          | 0%       | 1        | 1%       | 2        | 2%       |
| <b>Totals</b>   | 84 | 100% | 13           | 15%      | 23         | 27%      | 55       | 65%      | 29       | 35%      |

While the average age of learners is 24, 22 (19%) of the group are older than 26 (Appendix I). The trainers advised that during 2003, they had raised concerns about the ages of certain candidates with a member of the board, who had advised them that a person of 35 or younger was still categorised as "youth". It was also noted that the cut-off age for learnership candidates is 30.

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<sup>1</sup> One isiXhosa speaker interviewed knew that she had been born in the Eastern Cape, but not where; nor could she remember when last the family had had occasion to go "home".

## RECRUITMENT OF LEARNERS

Recruitment of learners has been different for each group:

|                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Group 1:<br>March 2003          | through print advertisements in the local media, sponsored by Kelly Personnel  |
| Group 2:<br>August 2003         | learnerships appointed/allocated via the SSETA Career Centre   |
| Group 3:<br>October 2003        | word-of-mouth, with a focus on regional associations for the blind (Cape Town proper, southern suburbs and Helderberg/Somerset West) |
| Groups 4 & 5:<br>Feb & May 2004 | word-of-mouth  |

Learners interviewed had been variously recruited through the vehicles listed above. As the programme becomes better established and known, it's likely that learners will be drawn into the programme in three primary ways:

- word-of-mouth
- through the Athlone Association for the Blind and the Athlone School (and associated organisations)
- through the SSETA Career Centre

Learners who are not on learnerships are expected to pay a fee of R 1 299 to the Athlone School for the Blind. It appears that there was a great deal of discussion around this matter, but that the overall rationale was two-fold, viz. to ensure some commitment to the learners, and because it was uncertain that the subvention of R 2 500/learner would, actually cover all the training costs. However, this requirement was inconsistently applied, with it's being waived by the Athlone School if the learner was deemed a needy and/or special case, e.g. a graduate of the School.

It was noted that learners on disability grants, who generally come from poor homes, receive a grant of R 690 per month, out of which they must pay fees, transport to and from school, as well as general living expenses. Further, it was reported that some learners struggled to attend classes towards the end of the month when ready cash for transport is scarce.

The trainers reported difficulty both eliciting the fees from learners, and it remains unclear which party (the Athlone School or Quality Solutions) was ultimately responsible for collecting these fees. Only three learners from the first group, managed to pay the full amount. This mandatory fee is not applicable for learnership candidates.

At the time of this evaluation, the fifth group of trainees was nearing the end of their theoretical training. Trainees and learnership candidates from groups two and four were doing practical training in the Insights Call Centre, Athlone School for the Blind.

## SERVICES SETA LEARNERSHIPS

All the learners in the second group of trainees are on SSETA learnerships, and are all employed by Quality Solutions<sup>2</sup>. Currently, they are working out of the Insights Call Centre, and the contracts conclude on 17<sup>th</sup> August 2004. The last few weeks of training and practical work focus on completion of portfolios of evidence (for summative assessment) and telesales.

Among these is a blind agent who was part of the first group of trainees. Quality Solutions felt that he would benefit from additional training and the support offered through a learnership. To this end, he was encouraged to apply for a learnership through the Services SETA Career Centre and was placed with Quality Solutions. Not only is he the top sales agent, but he was also one of the bearers of the Olympic torch on its journey through the streets of Cape Town.

Three other graduates of the first group were also awarded call centre (NQF 2) learnerships—two of these are partially sighted women. The other learnership was at NQF 4, as a call centre supervisor, and this was awarded to a black woman. All four of these individuals have clearly benefited from this additional support, most particularly the hands-on work in a call centre, a target-driven environment. Following this practice, Quality Solutions has suggested that those graduates, either not ready for, or struggling to, find employment, apply to the Services SETA (SSETA) for learnerships (see page 6).

The extended period of learning and support that is provided in a learnership is clearly beneficial—agents gain genuine work-place experience which improves their prospects for employment (see outputs—page 6).

While Quality Solutions' is not assured that those candidates that they refer to the SSETA Career Centre are placed in this programme, this seems relatively certain because

- this programme specifically caters for blind and partially sighted learners;
- the training is broadly based with a genuine attempt to expose learners to the range of activities, i.e. it is not geared to a particular type of call centre business and/or product. At the end of the training, graduates are encouraged to pursue the line that suits them best (for example, some people are born sellers, while others are better suited to customer service);
- the SSETA's perception of the greater risk of retrenchment of individuals at the conclusion to a learnership that is located in a commercial enterprise (mention was made of an actual incident where this has occurred); and
- the good relationship with the SSETA, as well as the SSETA's perception that the training is of a high standard.

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<sup>2</sup> In terms of the learnership agreement, the Department of Labour considers candidates as employed by the lead agency, in this case, Quality Solutions.

A list of the 84 learners for the all courses to date, which include notes regarding those who are still in training, on learnerships and/or employment status (if known) is included in Appendix I.

In summary, the outputs achieved are as follows:

|   |                 |     |
|---|-----------------|-----|
| <b>Employed/placed (with effect from 17<sup>th</sup> August 2004)</b> | 48              | 59% |
| <b>Unemployed</b>   | 15 <sup>3</sup> | 19% |
| <b>Still in training</b>  |                 |     |
| <b>Group 5</b>  | 11              | 14% |
| <b>Group 2 (SSETA Learnerships)</b>                                   | 26              | 32% |

|                |                          |
|----------------|--------------------------|
| <b>Blind</b>   | <b>Partially sighted</b> |
| 3 <sup>4</sup> | 12 <sup>5</sup>          |

If these results are used as benchmarks, it would seem that the total output will be achieved, although not within the specified contract period (ended 31 June 2004). The key reason for this is because two groups of trainees have not completed training (theoretical and practical, respectively), and there is an inevitable gap between completing training and successfully securing employment—Quality Solutions reports daily changes in the numbers of placements, and are confident that the majority of learnership graduates will find employment. Quality Solutions report difficulty trying to place blind graduates, and acknowledge that although placement of partially sighted graduates is also difficult, employers seem more prepared to accept these individuals into their workforces.

In addition to the above, in a personal communication on Friday, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2004, Quality Solutions advised that they had received confirmation that 16 graduates of the short course have been accepted for learnerships which have been awarded to Quality Solutions. These contracts will commence in August 2004, and conclude in 2005.

## THE VALUE OF THE TRAINING TO GRADUATES AND LEARNERS

Five learners were interviewed, as were six graduates. Of the latter group, four (4) are agents on learnerships and therefore employed by Quality Solutions in the Insights Call Centre. All the learners and agents volunteered to talk to the evaluator. The employed graduates were contacted by one of the trainers in advance of a telephone interview with the evaluator. During this interview, the graduate was asked whether his/her supervisor could also be interviewed, and in instances where the individual was clearly uncomfortable, this was not pursued. The data from the interviews with both learners and graduates is provided in Appendices II and III.

<sup>3</sup> Some of these may be employed: they were either not placed by Quality Solutions, or are currently untraceable.

<sup>4</sup> All on Call Centre Learnerships

<sup>5</sup> Two on Learnerships

All the individuals interviewed were confident and articulate, and honestly spoke about their experiences of the course. Without exception, they were all grateful for the opportunity that the training offers them, and one individual's story is particularly poignant: he hails from a gang and drug neighbourhood, and was sent to the Athlone School for the Blind at 16-years old, when he was diagnosed with a degenerative condition. He is now totally blind, but says that had he not gone blind and come to the school, he would probably be in jail, with his childhood mates. He recognises and is appreciative of the opportunities that he now has.

Unsolicited expressions of appreciation were made in respect of the support from the donor, as well as the trainers' professionalism and dedication.

There were clear and obvious differences between the learner, agent and graduate groups, which is directly attributable to their different experiences, e.g. current learners are not in a position to venture critical opinions on the quality of the training and what they might change. However, useful insights come from the graduates and agents, including:

- the need for more "live" telephone practice (as opposed to role-plays)
- the need for increased exposure to debt collecting, customer service, data capture and other-than-sales practice
- the need for a specific course/module in computer literacy

Graduates of the early groups made some of these comments. The trainers also identified these gaps in the programme, and they have largely been addressed.

## **EMPLOYABILITY AND EARNING CAPACITY**

The outputs indicate that graduates from this training, particularly those on learnerships, seem to be highly employable. Five of the host employers that accepted earlier graduates from group one, have either accepted new placements or have indicated that in the event of a vacancy, they would enthusiastically accept a placement from this project. One employer (whose staff member came from group one) wished to express his thanks to the Athlone School for the Blind, saying that they are very lucky to have this (partially sighted) employee, who has now been with them for an entire year!<sup>6</sup>

In response to a question about what would need to be put in place to accommodate disabled employees, it was noted that

- this was addressed on a case by case basis; and
- that those individuals that owned the necessary equipment (e.g. magnifiers, Braille's, etc.) would not only be more employable, but more confident in themselves.

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<sup>6</sup> This employer also indicated that although the employee is on a contract that has just been renewed, the goal was permanent employment.

Not all graduates work in call centres—a couple work in front-of-house customer service environments, e.g. in a hotel or car hire company; one is a bank teller, and two others have been accepted into administrative and/or secretarial learnerships with other employers (as opposed to training providers).

Earning capacity varies, and correlates with experience as well as whether or not the individual is on a learnership. Agents placed as interns with host employers generally earn a nominal monthly income (R 500/month<sup>7</sup>), but once they have proved themselves their earning capacity increases, as does their job security—a graduate who started work on this basis in a bank call centre, now earns R 2 800/month. Another graduate, not in full time employment, but who is contracted to do two to three call centre shifts per week, earns about R 1 220/month.

Agents on call centre learnerships (NQF2) receive a monthly stipend in the region of R 1 000/month, and have the opportunity of earning commission if they make successful sales. The stipend for the supervisory learnership (NQF 4) is R 2 360/month, without the possibility of commission.

## **The Training Programme**

The training programme was reviewed by examining appropriate documents and materials, direct observation as well as through in-depth discussion with trainers (Quality Solutions). This excellent programme seems to conform to the NQF. However, authoritative comment in this regard will come from the SETQAA<sup>8</sup> in due course—when the learnerships are moderated, and when Quality Solutions is subjected to the mandatory audit.

It is necessary to distinguish between graduates of the short course versus learnership graduates. The former consists largely of theoretical training, with limited exposure to live work in the call centre. Graduates achieve unit standards towards the NQF 2 qualification as a call centre operator (See Appendix IV—Quality Solutions Certificate). The discussion on assessment (pages 12-13) provides more information regarding the difference between the two.

## **APPROACH/PHILOSOPHY**

The approach reflects a learner-centred philosophy, which is tempered by an understanding of not simply the world of work, but the realities of the call centre environment. The clear understanding of the need to introduce learners<sup>9</sup> to the world of work is demonstrated in two key ways:

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<sup>7</sup> This employer accepted placements even though there were no vacancies (or budget) and positions were frozen. The intent behind the payment was to meet travel costs, and to employ the individuals once there were vacancies—two graduates have been employed through this approach. The graduates/interns were advised of the conditions and were not compelled to accept these conditions—they saw this as an opportunity to gain experience, and better position themselves in the job market.

<sup>8</sup> Services [SETA] Education and Training Quality Assurance Authority

<sup>9</sup> Many learners had not been into an office, or ever been employed prior to coming for training.

1. Learners who are doing the theoretical training are known as trainees, but they move from the training rooms into the Insights Call Centre, and become "agents".
2. The existence and application of a code of conduct, as well as a policy and procedures guide (Appendix V).

The benefit of this strategy, coupled with the fact that successful sales earn agents a commission (albeit small), begins to instil a work ethic and reinforces the consequences of not performing to expected standards. The impact of this approach will be enhanced as the Insights Call Centre draws in more business, begins to establish a core of competent agents and an established client base.

## **CONNECTION/ALIGNMENT WITH THE NQF**

All the training is based on call centre unit standards registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Those on learnerships complete a 12-month programme, with much of this consisting of hands-on-practice. At the conclusion to the contract period, portfolios of evidence are submitted for summative assessment, moderated by the SETQAA<sup>10</sup>. While other learners/graduates do not go through this process, there is scope for them to either apply for learnerships and/or to pursue this option through their employers.

## **COURSE OUTLINES AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

As would be expected, in light of the above, the course outline and learning objectives reflect the unit standards, but are generally articulated in language accessible to the learner.

## **METHODOLOGY**

While there was limited opportunity for classroom observation (50% of the learners were absent on one of the days that the evaluator was present<sup>11</sup>), the methodology seems to encourage a high level of interaction and participation. Training room activities are clearly designed to integrate theory and practice, enabling learners to develop both skills and confidence.

## **ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING**

Assessment takes place

1. prior to applicants being accepted into the programme (Quality Solutions refers to this as "pre-assessment");
2. during the theoretical and practical components of the course (formative/developmental assessment; and
3. at the end of the programme (summative).

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<sup>10</sup> At the time of writing, this process was about to begin.

<sup>11</sup> This was unusual and was attributed to transport problems—most learnersevenually arrived much later that day.

## **Entry/Placement Assessment**

All applicants must complete the placement assessment, regardless of their having been recommended by the SSETA Career Centre. The assessment tool is well constructed and consists of a question paper, answer sheet and facilitator guide. The process, which includes an interview, assesses candidates' competency through a number of tasks: spelling, numeracy, typing, letter writing, computer-based data capture, and telephone role plays (fundraising, customer service and sales). The assessment tool is available in Appendix VI.

Only candidates who achieve a score of 60% and above are accepted into the programme.

## **Formative Assessment**

Formative or developmental assessment can be divided into two broad categories of tasks:

- Those that formally engage the individual learner in activities to measure progress towards achieving a particular learning outcome/standard.
- Those in the training room that are less formal, and may involve group discussion, and which encourage reflection on the theory and its application (these activities are reflected in the training plans and are not the focus of this discussion [example available in Appendix VII]).

Formative assessment activities are well thought through and each learner's "product" and result is stored in his/her portfolio of evidence. This also forms part of the summative assessment process. Examples of assessment in Appendix VIII (three drawn from a learnership candidates' portfolio of evidence) activities include:

- a) An integrated assessment of service skills and fundamentals (spelling and mathematical literacy).
- b) A task that learners must complete on their own, for assessment against a specific unit standard. The rating for each element of the assessment is clearly explained.
- c) An apparently simple true/false exercise that requires the use of a range of skills: problem solving, analysis and knowledge application.
- d) A self-reflection activity that requires both a personal development plan, and an indication of the perceived relevance of the various unit standards to that individual.

## **Summative Assessment**

All learners collect portfolios of evidence which comprise the various assignments completed. In the case of short course graduates, in addition to the certificate mentioned earlier, they receive a report card (Appendix IX) that includes both their results and a comment from the trainer. These graduates are not assessed in the workplace, and consequently cannot be assessed against certain unit standards to achieve the full qualification.

Learnership candidates go through a more rigorous process for the assessment of their practical skills in the call centre, as reflected in the assessment plan (Appendix

X), which culminates in external moderation, a process underway at the time of writing this report.

## The Insights Call Centre

A call centre—the Insights Call Centre—has been established. Its function is two-fold:

- to provide the practical call centre training that is mandated in both the call centre short course, and the learnership (NQF 2 qualification); and
- to generate income to cover the costs of training (and for the Athlone Association for the Blind).

As is usually the case with fledgling enterprises, the Insights Call Centre encountered a number of challenges or teething problems during its initial period of operation:

1. Instability in the computer network because of the need to integrate JAWS and Zoom Text, which are required for blind and partially sighted agents.
2. Lack of in-bound business, which means that Insights' business has been predominantly sales driven. This has had two consequences—one financial, and the other training related. Each of these will be dealt with separately.
  - a) That the Insights Call Centre is largely staffed by trainees, has meant that Quality Solutions has not been able to secure inbound business: clients will not use inexperienced agents for customer service and debt collection activities. Consequently, primary business has been based on outgoing calls—raising funds for a local environmental charity, and selling a range of products. This has an added knock-on effect: because the agents are not productive<sup>12</sup>, the cost of running the centre exceeds the return. This reveals a weakness in the original business model that could not accommodate the possibility of a sales-dominated business base. Provision was thus not made for:
    - i) the cost of telephone calls used for "live" training—the reason for the Governing Board's instruction that agents be "taken off" the phones at one stage during the period under review;
    - ii) operating costs until the infrastructure (agents) become productive. This would have involved making provision for an initial loss, followed by a cost-recovery scenario before the centre would generate a surplus; and
    - iii) financial incentives for agents, which are essential in a target-driven business.
  - b) In respect of the implications from a training perspective, these may again be twofold: insufficient live interaction with prospective customers because use

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<sup>12</sup> It takes an estimated 18 months for an agent to become fully conversant with all aspects of call centre operations and therefore it is unrealistic to expect newly-trained agents to be immediately productive or profitable. This is compounded by the fact that the majority of learners in this programme are unfamiliar with the world of work, office procedure and office equipment.

of the telephones was curtailed, and agents may not have adequate practical exposure to areas other than sales.

- i) However, as the Insights Call Centre becomes established, secures different business, and as agents who remain in the Centre acquire the requisite experience, this could change.
  - ii) The above (i) is contingent on addressing some of the cash flow and management problems.
3. Late payment of funds from the SSETA for the learnerships. Consequently, Quality Solutions bore the financial burden of ensuring that learners' stipends were paid on time each month, as well as related costs.

Notwithstanding the above, these problems did not percolate to the learners and agents, all of whom commented on the quality of their experience.

## COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS

Overall, this is an excellent training programme, and although there have been challenges, the trainers have used these as learning opportunities, resulting in a stronger, more dynamic course. However, a number of concerns emerged regarding the Athlone School's administration of the programme, and its fulfilment of obligations as set out in the contract and project description. Many of the comments and observations have been discussed with the Project Manager<sup>13</sup> and trainers, as part of the ongoing discussions that are part of this review process.

### Weaknesses

Overall, the results indicate, as does the feedback from learners, that there are no startling weaknesses in the training programme. However, there are areas that could be strengthened:

1. In regards to the training and related matters, the following have been identified by the trainers as requiring attention:
  - a) The instability of the computer network, particularly in respect of JAWS and Zoom Text.
  - b) Dependence on two trainers—one for theory and one for practical.
  - c) The shortage of resources (people and time) to provide adequate support to interns placed with off-site host employers.
  - d) The learner notes do not include examples and/or case studies.

It was noted that Quality Solutions had contracted a second trainer, early in the contract period, but that this had been unsuccessful. The key reasons for this were that dependence on and generally anecdotal nature of the examples used by the trainers, which varied. Consequently, there was little consistency between the two groups of learners. (Quality Solutions' reports specifically comment on the trainers' use of different examples.) The absence of case studies and examples in the learners' notes and training materials would have contributed to this.

2. Institutional matters
  - a) The absence of a contract/agreement between the Athlone Association for the Blind and Quality Solutions is a matter of great concern for a number of reasons:
    - i) There appear to be no clear lines of accountability and areas of responsibility, making effective management, administration and reporting difficult.
    - ii) Other than the contract from with donor, there is no record of the various parties' obligations and how they will be achieved—this is both inappropriate and too loose for effective management.

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<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that these issues pre-date the appointment of the Project Manager (January 2004), who is taking steps to address many of the problems.

- iii) Neither party (the Association nor Quality Solutions) is afforded any real protection, a situation that does not serve the learner, or the donor which has invested a considerable amount in this project.
- b) The lack of support from the Athlone Association for the Blind in respect of the following, as required in terms of the project description:
  - i) Curriculum development
  - ii) Administration of the learnership programme
  - iii) Assessment of candidates
  - iv) Placement of graduates
  - v) Generic skills training

Prior to the appointment of the Project Manager, there appears to have been an abdication of its responsibility on the part of the Athlone School/Association for the Blind in respect of this project. Despite this, Quality Solutions remains loyal to the objectives of the programme and to the Athlone Association for the Blind.

## **Strengths of the programme**

Other than the obvious successes, to date, i.e. the number of young people successfully trained and gainfully employed, the significant strength in this project is the trainers' ability to adapt the programme to meet the changing needs of two its "client" markets, viz., the learner and the Services SETA. The clear strengths include:

1. An excellent, well structured programme through which the outputs have been achieved.
2. Quality Solutions' ability to adapt and learn to accommodate
  - a) learners' needs—e.g. by incorporating computer literacy, communication and numeracy into the training programme
  - b) the rigorous demands of administering learnerships—both in terms of the learning programme and the financial burden
3. Quality Solutions' dedication to the learners and the programme goals.
4. Quality Solutions' obvious technical competence and standing in the industry.<sup>14</sup>
5. The appointment of the Project Manager who is committed to addressing some of the problems above: this can only enhance the project and result in the realisation of its long term potential.

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<sup>14</sup> Both Melanie Bailes and Audrey Knight are registered assessors, and the latter is also a moderator. While this process was underway, she was performing this function for Quest Personnel. In addition, they are involved with Calling the Cape (a regional call centre association), and have been approached by at least two different organisations for assistance).

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Notwithstanding the institutional problems identified above, this is a successful training programme, even though all the activities had not been completed by 31<sup>st</sup> June 2004. The current learners will complete the various aspects of their training, and will be supported in their search for employment, as has been the case with all other graduates. Specific recommendations related to the findings are as follows:

### 1. Training and related matters

The recommendations below are intended to offer support to the trainers as they continue developing and strengthening the programme.

- (a) Work towards strengthening the learners' notes to incorporate:
  - (i) examples and case studies
  - (ii) activities that encourage active engagement with the content when learners review the material outside the training room.

This is vital when bringing additional trainers or facilitators on board.

- (b) Devise a management plan that reduces the dependence on only two trainers.<sup>15</sup>
- (c) Secure ongoing hard- and software support to address the network instability caused by JAWS and Zoom Text.
- (d) As the NQF and related systems develop, more and more unit standards-based, generic learning support materials are becoming available. These provide useful resources, particularly in the fundamental learning areas (communication and mathematical literacy).
- (e) While much is demanded of the trainers' time, which makes networking and participating in discussion forums difficult, consideration should be given to participating in SSETA and SAQA forums could offer useful support.<sup>16</sup>
- (f) The development of appropriate systems and tools to facilitate workplace support and assessment of learners:  
the learnership model of contracting with an on-site mentor who is also the supervisor could be a useful model—s/he could provide the trainers with weekly updates, who could also set up regular telephonic discussions with interns.

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<sup>15</sup> It is noted that Quality Solutions would like to retain two graduates to train as facilitators—perhaps this is the first step towards addressing this challenge.

<sup>16</sup> In addition to regular training workshops, the SAQA regional office holds discussion forums every two months. That scheduled for August will deal with the integration of fundamental learning into qualifications (including learnerships). Information is available from the SAQA web site ([www.saqa.org.za](http://www.saqa.org.za)).

- (g) Investigate ways of assisting blind and partially sighted graduates to purchase the equipment that they will need in the workplace—this will make them both more confident and more employable.

## 2. Institutional/Systemic Issues

A number of the challenges that emerged encountered during the review period are a function of both the business model underpinning the project, and the structure of the relationship between the Athlone Association for the Blind and the training provider. The latter was further complicated because the training provider is a commercial operation serving a not-for-profit organisation, which presents difficulties for donors wishing to offer ongoing support. In light of this, the following are suggested:

- (a) Re-visit the Insights Call Centre Business model, bearing in mind:
- (i) That it must become a viable business based on considered medium to long term planning that addresses:
- The total actual cost of training an individual through the short course and the learnership
  - The costs of "live" call centre training
  - The needs (capital and operating) of a growing sales-based business<sup>17</sup>
  - Developing a cohort of productive agents that can both generate income and provide on-site peer support to new agents (graduates)
  - The costs of maintaining and supporting the training of call centre agents
  - The channelling of any surplus funds into other projects of the Athlone Association for the Blind
- (ii) That lines of accountability and areas of responsibility must be clarified with a view to developing an organisational structure that is in the best interests of the learners, the Athlone Association for the Blind, and the trainers who have not only developed the training programme, but whose entity is an accredited training provider.

With this in mind, it is suggested that with the trainers' agreement, a Section 21 company (not for gain) established to house the training programme. The following could inform the structure of the company:

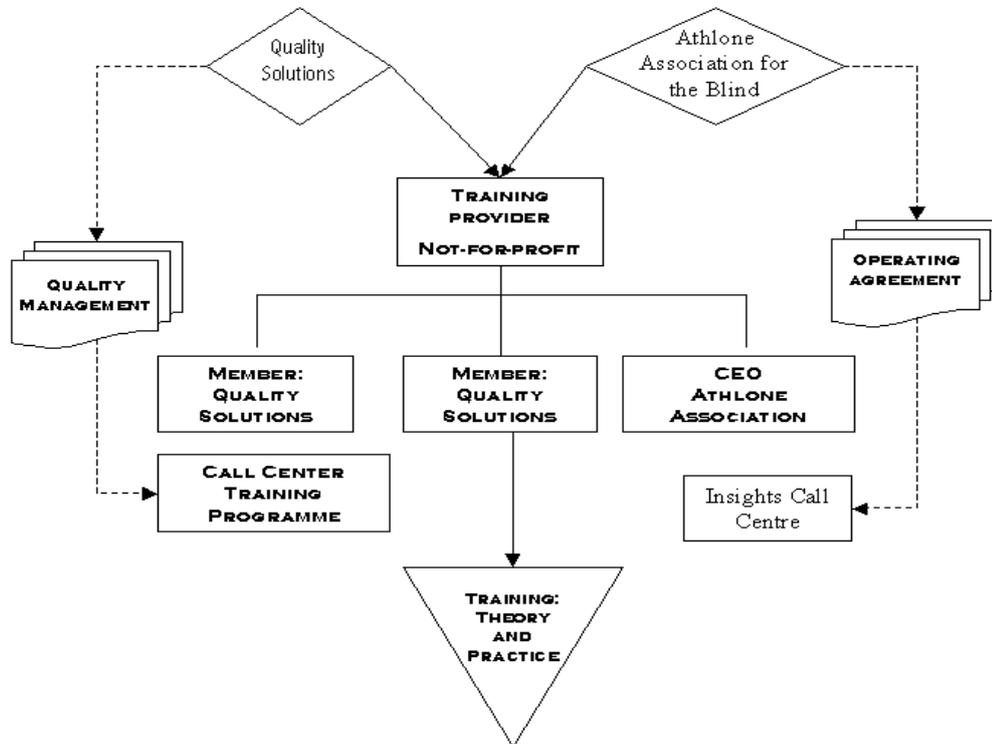
- The directors of the company could include, inter alia, the Chief Executive Officer of the Athlone Association for the Blind and Quality Solutions' members (trainers).

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<sup>17</sup> This is cognisant of the fact that clients are hesitant to place in-bound business in a call centre that is largely staffed by trainees and inexperienced call centre agents.

- That it will provide training for call centre agents as a project of the Athlone Association for the Blind.
- That it operates the Insights Call Centre, which is currently located in the Athlone School for the Blind.
- That the proceeds of the company will be used to support the call centre training programme and projects of the Athlone Association for the Blind.
- The new entity could either be "franchised" by Quality Solutions, or seek accreditation as a training provider through the Services SETA.<sup>18</sup>
- Recognising their contribution to the development of the programme, that ownership of the intellectual property should remain with the Quality Solutions.

Below is a diagrammatic representation of the suggested structure



**FIONA CAMERON-BROWN (Ms)**  
**26 July 2004**

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<sup>18</sup> The franchise option would not interrupt the availability of a programme through an accredited training provider—responsibility for quality management, as set out by the SETQAA would reside with Quality Solutions, the accredited entity.