

## **The Rough Guide to Becoming an NVQ Assessor**

I haven't always been interested in education, particularly during those far-off days when I was supposed to be undertaking it. I remember that hiking, climbing mountains and checking out the local youth club were always far more interesting ways for passing one's time. However, parental pressure and reductions in pocket money eventually took effect and I wearily trod the path of seemingly unending study, until eventually and somewhat surprisingly, I acquired a professional qualification.

At that time, such qualification really meant something, not only to my long-suffering father, but also to the outside world. Potential clients were able to see from the letters after my name that I wasn't just any old surveyor, but one who, in denying himself the pleasures of life in order to sweat over books and manuscripts, had gained the knowledge and thereby presumably the ability, to protect their business interests.

But since then the world has changed. Some say that Universities are no longer interested in teaching detail, thus denying people the vital building blocks of knowledge required to effectively carry out tasks in subsequent employment. Others say that engineering and construction technology has become so complex that no one candidate can possibly embrace it in its entirety. Others simply mutter about things not being what they used to be. But, for whatever reason, a professional qualification based on today's education system is no longer accepted in the way that it was and some clients are increasingly demanding a verification of competence as well. And competence cannot be measured under examination; it must be demonstrated, preferably in the workplace itself.

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I first became aware of this some twenty years ago when managing an office of surveyors and cost engineers working on large process and industrial projects. I began to notice that many of them, although lacking any recognised qualification, nonetheless demonstrated great ability and considerable competence in their daily work. I could witness this because they worked for me, but they, without any formal independent verification, had no way to demonstrate it to others. Furthermore, for my part, I had no independent method for demonstrating to my clients what a competent bunch of people I had working on their projects!

It was about a year ago that I met up with Richard Plumb, a Director of the Association of Cost Engineers, who told me all about the NVQ (National Vocational Qualification). Up until then I had always thought that NVQ was applicable only to work activities of a menial nature and certainly not for those of us who considered ourselves to be up in the stratosphere on the scale of meaningful jobs. Richard, however, put me right on that and explained how he and Howard Mallinson had spent the past few years developing a specification, within the NVQ framework, for the assessment of competence in Project Control. In so doing they had set up a not-for-profit assessment organisation called TASC (The Assessment Centre) as part of ACostE. Richard explained that NVQ is based on five levels of competence, levels 3, 4 and 5 thereof being in management and that how, in his and Howard's opinion, there would be an increasing demand within the industry for independently assessed competence at those higher levels. By, a) designing standards for Project Control, b)

putting those standards in a format compatible with formal NVQ framework, c) obtaining accreditation by a recognised external verification body (in this case, ECITB) and d) recruiting cost engineers with managerial experience as assessors, TASC would cater for that demand by providing independent competence assessments to NVQ, specifically designed for people of our discipline. I was immediately interested.

And so, when retirement dawned and my wife indicated that a new life with feet up and unending supplies of care and attention, was probably not for me, I decided that I would become an NVQ assessor.

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The NVQ is the `generic` national standard against which one is assessed; it is not the discipline in which one is being assessed. Therefore the first thing I had to understand before being allowed to become an assessor was that, despite a past career in Project Control, it was necessary for me to learn the principles of NVQ procedure and obtain an `A1 Diploma` in Assessment - and for that I had to go back to college.

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The transformation from being a self-important manager, who thinks he knows everything, back to that of a student, is an interesting experience, which for me took place on NVQ Induction Day. Looking around the room I was immediately made aware that NVQ is indeed for everyone and that it was still possible to identify individual discipline from appearance. Social workers, for instance, still tend to dress as if they have just come in from the garden, trainee hairdressers as if they entered through a hedge backwards, whilst beauty therapists look...well...beautiful! Anyone wearing a suit will be a quantity surveyor. There was a tutor who was knowledgeable and efficient. Few of those present (except the quantity surveyor) seemed to have heard of Project Control, but that didn't matter as the purpose of the day was to introduce us all to the joys of generic NVQ assessing.

The session opened with the terrifying discovery that at some stage during the course it will be necessary for the tutor to witness me carrying out an actual assessment of my candidates at their place of work. It became apparent that for all the other students present, such sessions could be held locally and would involve the tutor merely taking a stroll down the road, perhaps popping into Sainsbury's on the way back. For my Project Control, however, it would have to take place at a distant site location involving the tutor in several hours travel, possibly even having to leave before dawn! This came as a bit of a shock and negotiations over it took some time. Without this I would be unable to obtain my Diploma so it was vital for it to be agreed before the day was out and preferably before paying the fee!

Once that was settled, the day continued with a riveting introduction to procedures, the receipt of a workbook in which to file one's experience and evidence plus innumerable forms for completion and signature, all to be correctly completed, collated and verified. Only upon satisfactory completion of all that (together with the witnessed assessment referred to above) would an assessment be made of my ability to assess to NVQ and if so, the Diploma hopefully be mine. I remember driving home

with the conviction that perhaps bee-keeping might be a better option, but after a couple of cold showers and an hour or so of further study of the workbook, things became clearer and I felt able to pass onto the next stage.

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Having been introduced to, if not initially understood, what is required under the rules of NVQ, the next step was to return to TASC to find out how those rules can incorporate the discipline of Project Control. This involved attending the next TASC Assessors` Meeting, which provided opportunity to meet the other assessors as well as receiving, amongst other documents, the TASC Assessors Workbook. This is the very comprehensive instruction manual which sets out, not only the TASC/NVQ procedures, but also details the Project Control Competencies together with a specification of the respective Competence levels, thus forming the basis for each candidate`s assessment. It also contains a further selection of forms.

I was then introduced to the rules for internal and external verification, the understanding of which not should not be attempted after a late night out. For a candidates` certificate of competence to be acceptable externally (which is the objective) he/she must be seen to have been correctly and verifiably assessed by a competent assessor working on behalf of a competent assessment centre. For TASC and its assessors to maintain such recognition, a vigorous verification procedure must be followed. A new assessor`s assessments must be assessed by an existing assessor. TASC then has a team of internal verifiers who randomly assess its existing assessors` assessments including the assessments of the new assessors` assessments. The outside awarding body has its external verifier who then randomly assesses the internal verifiers` assessments of the assessors` assessments, as well as assessing and verifying that all TASC`s procedures comply with the requirements of NVQ. When satisfied with all that, the external verifier then issues, annually, his accreditation of TASC, which confirms both it and its assessors` competence, to assess competence.

You may need to read that paragraph again.

Finally, the meeting reviewed new appointments which TASC had received, at which point I received the disturbing news that I had been allocated my first candidates. I am initially restricted to two until I obtain the A1 Diploma, after which the number can be increased, assuming of course, that the assessments of my assessments have been satisfactory.

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The first meeting with my initial candidates took the form of an Induction session at their workplace. Prior to that, each candidate had completed a self-assessment form which had then been reviewed by TASC and which enabled me to acquaint myself with their details prior to the meeting.

The Induction itself was led by an existing assessor, who will continue to supervise me until I obtain my Diploma. He made a presentation about TASC after which we both reviewed each candidate`s self-assessment and agreed the competence level recommended by TASC to which each of them will be assessed. For their part the

candidates were enthusiastic and had obviously read thoroughly the Instruction Manual previously sent to them. I hadn't of course – but I will have next time!

Since then I have carried out several assessments of my candidates, both of whom are performing well and maintaining enthusiasm. They are both extremely experienced in their respective disciplines but it has been interesting to note that, as they work their way through the competence units, they are identifying scope which they had not experienced before. They can then identify how to obtain experience in and be assessed on, such additional scope, thus enabling the NVQ assessment to become a learning tool for them as well.

As for my Diploma, preparation is coming along nicely. I still have to undergo my own assessment and still have a few forms to fill in – well, rather a lot actually, but I am sure I will find them soon.

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NVQ is not intended to be a replacement for a recognised professional qualification. But as I suggested earlier, a qualification is perhaps less acceptable today unless supported by a verifiable demonstration of competence. Meanwhile, many people who have not obtained any qualification are often extremely competent. Also, clients are looking for verification that staff and operatives named in submissions and tenders can do the job and Government is pressing for a better trained workforce. For all these reasons, NVQ in Project Control can provide, if not a replacement for qualification, then certainly very appropriate and adequate alternative or supplement to it.

The NVQ procedures governing professional assessing are initially a bit confusing and the verification requirements, although frustrating, are necessary in order that credibility can be maintained. I have found that becoming an assessor is a bit like riding a bicycle: after a few tumbles you are suddenly doing it, are not quite sure how, but it is an enjoyable and rewarding experience. Assessing is easier than expected, the brain cells are kept active, the subject matter is familiar and there is opportunity for helping other people with the development of their careers. Not a bad way to spend a bit of spare time.

It also appears that Richard and Howard's predictions were correct; there does seem to be greater demand for NVQ assessments of Project Control at management level and TASC is receiving an increasing number of enquiries. We are therefore looking for more assessors, so if you are able to join us, please call the TASC office now for details and an application.

There is probably a form for it.

