



National Audit Office

Identifying and meeting central government's skills requirements

Detailed Methodology

JULY 2011

Detailed Methodology

1 This online methodology accompanies *Identifying and meeting central government's skills requirements*, our 2011 report, and gives further detail to the methodology included in the main report at Appendix One.

Study scope

2 This National Audit Office report is cross government in nature and doesn't focus on any specific department. The report assesses whether central government's approach to identifying and meeting its skills requirements has provided value-for-money. Our review examines the arrangements in existence immediately before the launch of Civil Service Learning in April 2011. The first part of the report sets out the government skills context, identifying our expectations for how skills development processes should operate. Part Two examines how departments have planned skills development to align with their business needs. Part Three looks at how well they have implemented these plans.

Methodology

3 The following research methods were used during the course of this study:

- The development of an assessment framework.
- A review of secondary data covering reports and surveys relating to skills produced by and for government and a quantitative analysis of Cabinet Office data relating to learning and development expenditure.
- Web-based cross government survey of a sample of senior civil service staff.
- Semi-structured interviews with officials responsible for skills issues across government.
- Departmental case studies: Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Environment and Rural Affairs, and HM Treasury.
- Private sector case studies.

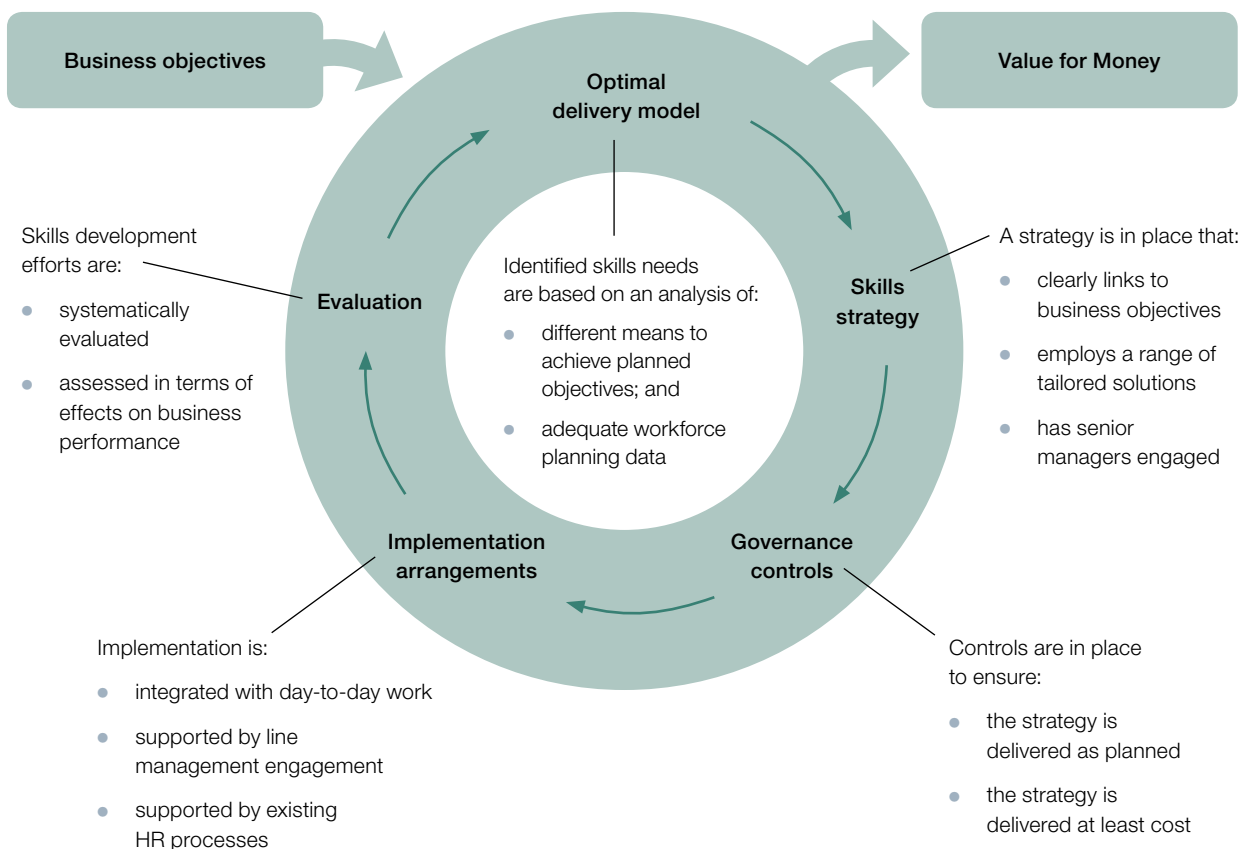
4 The main elements of our fieldwork took place between January 2011 and May 2011.

Development of an assessment framework

5 Drawing on the expertise of learning and development experts from our strategic partner PricewaterhouseCoopers, we adapted a basic management cycle to reflect our expectations regarding how government can ensure skills development efforts deliver value for money (Figure 1). Key amongst these is that skills development should be driven by government's priority business objectives. To ensure this, we identified specific expectations in the assessment framework, which we then used as a basis to examine practice in central government.

Figure 1

National Audit Office review of skills development in central government – our expectations



Source: National Audit Office

Review of secondary data

6 Our review included skills strategy documents, departmental capability reviews, government surveys undertaken both for and by central government, relevant papers prepared for the Cabinet Office, NAO reports from the last three years and a quantitative analysis of Next Generation HR data. The purpose of this review was to inform our understanding of departmental strategic objectives and establish the extent of, and possible impact of skills gaps across government.

7 In order to understand how much is spent on learning and development across the civil service we analysed information which had been provided to Next Generation HR by departments relating to the 2009-10 financial year. This data related to learning and development expenditure, including the salary costs of individuals involved with learning and development, as well as any external expenditure. We discussed the robustness of this data with individuals within Civil Service Learning.

Web-based survey

8 We conducted a web-based survey of a sample of senior civil servants from across all departments and the ten largest agencies (by headcount). The survey was sent out in January 2011 and remained open until the end of March.

9 Our sample of 173 senior civil servants was identified through departmental organisation charts available on the Cabinet Office's website. We preselected Finance and HR Directors from the population and randomly selected Directors and Director Generals in business units to make up the remainder of the sample.

10 The survey was designed to assist our understanding of skills gaps across government, managerial engagement in the design of training and the level of evaluation learning and development receives. We asked respondents their opinion on:

- skills gaps, data quality and resourcing;
- the mix of interventions used to address skills gaps; and
- how training is evaluated.

11 We received 89 responses in total giving us a response rate of 51 per cent. Of the 89 respondents, 54 identified themselves as from a 'business area', 18 from an 'HR function' and 17 from a 'finance function'.

Semi-structured interviews with officials responsible for skills issues across government

12 We interviewed staff from the Cabinet Office, Government Skills and Civil Service Learning to provide us with an understanding of how the centre of government meets its responsibility for improving the capability of the civil service. In particular, we sought to understand how Civil Service Learning addressed the key risks to value for money in relation to learning and development expenditure.

Departmental case studies

13 We selected three case studies to enable us to explore in more depth the issues arising from our document review and web-based survey. Selection criteria were designed to give us a range covering:

- size of department;
- assessed skills development capabilities (based on Departmental Capability Reviews); and
- nature of training focus (business specific or generic).

14 We conducted semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews with key staff in human resources, skills professions and business areas in the Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Environment and Rural Affairs, and HM Treasury.

15 The case studies allowed us to, amongst other things:

- examine the adequacy of departmental governance arrangements for identifying, approving, reporting and overseeing investment in skills development;
- examine the factors departments consider when choosing between different options to address specific skills needs;
- examine the management information on skills and expenditure that is routinely collected and used by departments;
- understand how departments are able to identify staff skills and deploy them where needed; and
- review whether skills development activities are evaluated, and how evaluation data are used to make decisions.

Private sector case studies

16 We asked our strategic partner PricewaterhouseCoopers to identify examples from the private sector of good practice in certain aspects of skills development. The examples highlight the importance of tailoring solutions to meet needs, involving managers in skills development, and identifying and allocating staff effectively to utilise and develop skills.