

Since their introduction in the mid 1980s to address lacklustre vocational training in the UK, national occupational standards (NOS) have become ubiquitous. Normally developed by the 25 national sector skills councils (SSCs), which are employer led independent organisations funded by the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA), they set out the skills, knowledge and understanding needed in a job. In addition, they define the outcomes to be expected from competent performance and although they now have a range of uses, historically their primary function was as the foundation for NVQs. When the Skills for Business network, which includes the SSCs and SSDA, launches its NOS directory later this year, it will include about 18,000 entries for industry standards, from healthcare to hairdressing, to administration and management.

Charities haven't been left out. A number of the standards apply to aspects of the voluntary sector, such as youth work, environmental conservation, community development and health and social care. And two have also been devised for the sector as a whole, which cover fundraising and managing volunteers. These will shortly be joined by a third: the NOS for trustees and management committee members, the draft of which was recently out for consultation.

Linda Lawrence, the former chair of

Making the grade

Guidance for trustees doesn't just stop with the Charity Commission. Peter Davy explains how new occupational standards are being developed that aim to raise the bar when it comes to charity governance

Charity Trustee Networks and an independent governance consultant, chaired the Workforce Development Hub (WDH) group that developed the new standards. Despite being initially sceptical, she became convinced of their value. "There's a lot of literature on governance, but very little that actually spells out what's expected of trustees for them to properly discharge their duties," she says. "That's what this does."

Both as an induction document for new trustees and a guide for those already in the role, Lawrence thinks the NOS will become an important tool for raising standards of governance. She also hopes they may help with trustee recruitment; next year the WDH will begin work with a university or other awarding body to develop a certificate in governance, based on NOS, that trustees may be able to use to impress prospective employers.

However, new qualifications were not the main aim of the standards, according to the NCVO's Karen Hale-Robertson, project manager at the WDH, which led the work. "They're the least of my hopes for these standards," she says. Instead, one of her ambitions is that they become a "platform" for developing different resources, such as training courses or guides. She feels this would help improve the quality of such services and give charities some reassurance about the quality and relevance of the material on offer. She also expects the standards will be useful as a reference when recruiting trustees or conducting skills audits, for example.

This is pretty much in line with current thinking about the best use of standards generally. As Sue Hook, cross sector manager at SkillsActive, an SSC, explains, standards are increasingly being "decoupled" from their association with NVQs. "There's a growing awareness standards aren't just for qualifications," she says. "Rather they're being used as a more general HR and management tool when writing job descriptions, conducting staff appraisals, tracking personal development, benchmarking organisational performance or identifying training needs."

On the job

Oxford Archaeology is a good example. An educational charity with an annual income of about £6 million, and the largest independent archaeological practice in Europe, it was part of a pilot project a couple of years ago promoting the use of the, then, new NOS in archaeological practice. This involved drawing up a new job description for its senior project managers based entirely on the NOS, and the organisation is now doing the same for the rest of its 200-odd employees.

To do so involves sifting through the NOS, which run to hundreds of pages, and picking out those units appropriate to each staff position. However, according to Susan Wintersgill, the senior projects manager at Oxford Archaeology who leads the work, the effort is worth it. She says that in clarifying what is required for each job, the standards have brought recruitment benefits, sharpening vacancy advertising and the interview process, as well as improving the appraisal system by making it more transparent to employees. They have also helped hone the organisation's management. "By using the standards to identify much more clearly just what it is that we do, they've kept us

focussed on our core functions so that we're better able to develop our strategic plan," she explains.

But not everyone is so keen. Richard Bolden at the Centre for Leadership Studies in Exeter University, points out a number of inherent weaknesses identified with the standards approach.

One of the most commonly cited is that standards focus too closely on the individual, ignoring the fact the responsibilities they describe often need to be shared across an organisation. "Standards tend to leave you with a vision of someone who is superman," argues Bolden. "They describe a person who is meant to be competent and able in all these different areas, but in reality even senior people in an organisation are weak in certain areas; they get round that by working with others who are strong."

Another criticism is that in seeking to draw up NOS that are applicable across a wide range of organisations, drafters often struggle to find the right balance between the specific and the general. In interviews for his research on the NOS in management, for example, Bolden says he found many people thought the qualities and skills the standards outlined were not much different from those that could be expected from any good employee. "They also likened many of them to decent parenting skills," he adds.

Although the trustees NOS currently emphasise the importance of disciplines such as reading the Charity Commission's guidance, those developing the standards were acutely aware of the difficulties in meeting the needs of organisations across the sector.

Particularly among smaller groups, for example, there was a fear the standards could prove a hindrance to recruitment. "One of their main concerns was that putting trustees' goals and responsibilities into black and white would actually deter some people from volunteering to serve on the board," explains Hale-Robertson. To tackle this, the WDH was careful to ensure that it included the views of both large national charities and small community groups when developing the standards. It has also drafted in outside writers to work on the language used in the NOS to ensure it's accessible, and plans to produce a series of "mini guides" on the standards for community groups.

The development team is also confident it has addressed Bolden's first criticism, that too much attention is focussed on the individual. It says it will be pushing the new standards as "a package" together with the Governance Code that was published in July, and the draft standards refer readers to this. The idea is that the NOS will focus on the individual's responsibilities, the code on the organisations'.

Lessons from the past

However, a more serious danger for the new standards is that they will simply fail to have an impact. This is the fate that Mary Holley, deputy director of HR at the NSPCC, fears could await them. As a key player in delivering social services, her charity is a keen user of NOS devised for social care (and has no choice but to be, given government stipulations about the training of care workers). However, she admits there has been rather less use of the NOS for fundraising, which she helped introduce by

chairing the board responsible for developing them.

She fears that without the element of compulsion and an organisation dedicated to promoting them, the trustee NOS will also fall into disuse. "The standards might end up being like the fundraising ones, because with the social care standards you've got a body in the form of the General Social Care Council that pushes them; with the fundraising standards there was only the NCVO, and it has a very broad focus."

According to Hale-Robertson, though, that is exactly why the new standards will succeed. She admits the existing standards haven't had the impact most hoped for, but says the explanation is simple: "We've been functioning on about six months funding for the last three years." While NCVO was funded by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to develop the standards, it does not fund their implementation, which is left to the SSCs. Unfortunately, the voluntary sector doesn't have one.

The result has been little in the way of promotion of the standards, and a correspondingly low take up. "It's no good just to release these 250-page standards and say, 'You're on your own; go use them,'" says Hale-Robertson. "But that is basically what happened."

However, with the advent of the WDH, she says there is now the capacity and funding to start promoting all three voluntary sector standards. The work has already been planned: last year saw a pilot programme to train 45 organisations in using the volunteer management standards, which resulted in 70 per cent of the participants taking them up. Next year this programme is to be rolled out to councils for voluntary service and volunteer bureaux across the country to spread the knowledge to local groups. Meanwhile, for training providers, an accreditation system with a kite mark is planned to endorse courses that follow the standards.

"This time next year, it will be a very different story," promises Hale-Robertson. For the voluntary sector, it looks like this is just the start of the learning curve.

Pass notes: The trustee and management NOS

The draft standards run to about ten pages and attempt to set out best practice in all core competencies of trusteeship. They are divided into four units, each of which detail the responsibilities trustees have, and the knowledge, skills and qualities required to meet them. The units cover the trustees' responsibilities to:

- Safeguard the values and mission of the organisation
- Determine the strategy and structure of the organisation
- Ensure the organisation operates in a responsible and accountable manner
- Ensure the effective functioning of the board

Consultation on the draft has now closed, and the final units will be available this December. In the meantime, more information can be found at www.voluntarysectorskills.org.uk.

