

Skills Funding Agency

Placement Report

Coventry

Priya Punj
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Organisational Background

The Skills Funding Agency (SFA) is a partner organisation of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) existing to fund and promote adult further education (FE) and skills training in England. It is part of a network of organisations in the country that commission, manage and market training for adults. It came about in 2008 after the Government announced radical changes to the way education and training for young people and adults was to be managed and funded in the future. It is a national organisation, part of the FE and skills sector, employing around 1200 members of staff in its main office in Coventry as well as in 21 other offices around England. The FE and skills sector comprises of more than 220 FE Colleges, 900 independent training providers, and around 2500 training organisations with which colleges and providers subcontract. It is all of these organisations that make skills work. Our job is to facilitate their crucial mission by making funding and support available.

Our mission is to ensure that people and businesses can access the skills and training they need to succeed in playing their part in society and growing England's economy. The SFA invests around £4 billion per year of public spending in colleges and training organisations. The funding enables people to improve their performance in their jobs, get new jobs, or progress in their careers. We work to an annual budget, targets and priorities set by BIS through the Skills Investment Strategy, published each autumn.

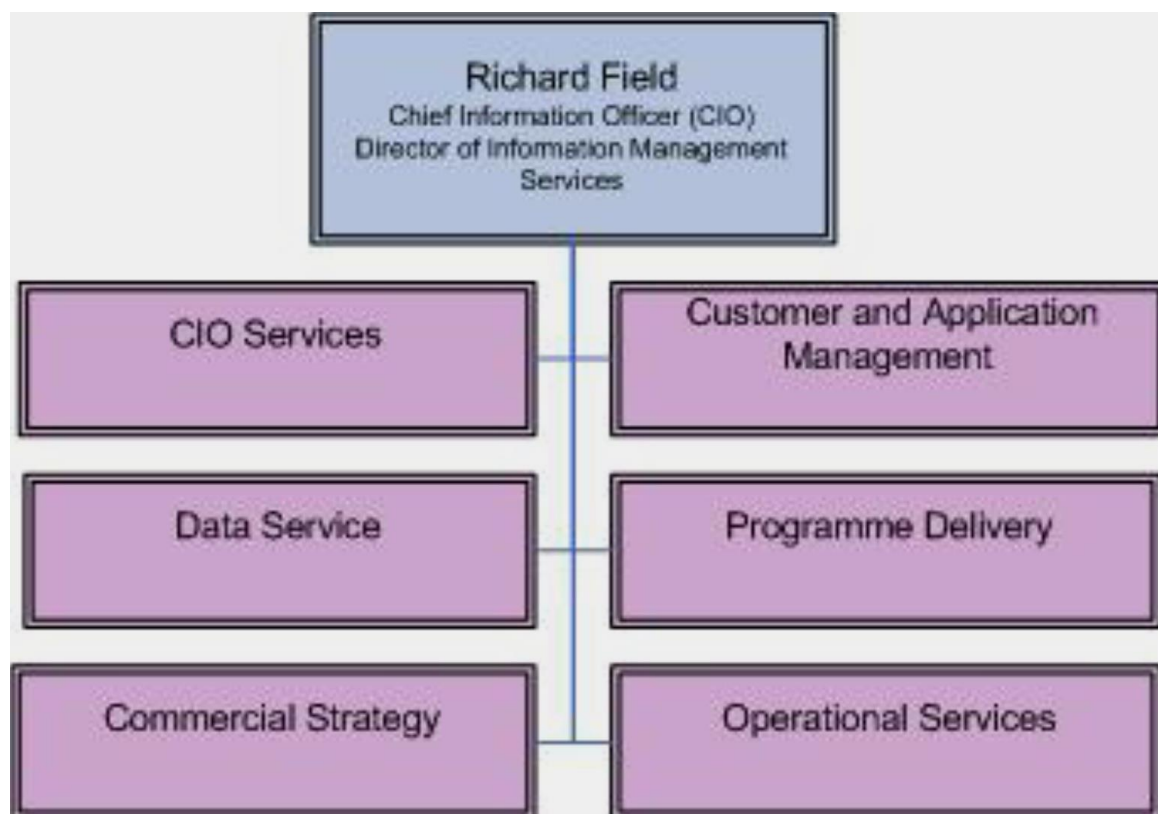
I worked within the Coventry office in Information Management (IM) Services, a shared service supporting the SFA, the Education Funding Agency (EFA) and the wider skills sector. It is a division of the SFA and provides IT (Information Technology) and information services to the Agency including the Apprenticeships division. IM Services consists of technology, information service and project management specialists working to deliver IT enabled programmes. Its mission and vision are outlined below:

Mission: To provide excellence and expertise in delivering Information Management Services to all our stakeholders in education and skills sector.

Vision: To be a successful Information Management Service used as a benchmark for effective shared services delivery.

Within the IM Services I am working in the Programme Delivery function where programme and project management services are provided to the FE sector. Specifically, I am working in the Benefits Centre of Excellence within Programme Delivery. I began my role within the Data Service function of IM Services. Their job is to manage the collection, transformation and dissemination of all further education data. The Data Service was established in April 2008 as an independently managed organisation, established and funded by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills to act as a single central point of information for further education. The figure shows the structure of IM Services comprising of six different functions.

IM Services structure



Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Sustainability

Energy and environment

Increased legislation and European directives on energy emissions and efficiency have increased the need for organisations to develop carbon management and sustainability strategies. As part of coordinating all aspect of energy management, such as energy efficiency and reduction of carbon dioxide emissions the SFA are accountable for:

- The development of a five year plan detailing improvements in energy efficiency, reduction of Co2 emissions, waste/recycling management and other related sustainable development issues
- Monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of the plan and associated policies and strategies
- Carrying out site inspections and energy surveys
- Ensuring accurate records are maintained and energy monitoring data is collected regularly
- Submission of data to fulfil the Agency's obligations in respect of legislative and departmental requirements
- Benchmarking energy consumption against best practice guidelines; keeping abreast of legislation and ensuring compliance
- The management of the Agency's registration and compliance with the carbon reduction commitment
- Preparing detailed schedules of work/feasibility studies, cost estimates and business cases to support the team's annual business plan as well as any applications for funds
- Organising events, workshops and staff training to promote reduction in energy consumption and sustainable development within the Agency's estate.

Below is a list of what has already been done in regards to this:

- Replaced water fountains with inline water coolers, reducing the impact of delivering plastic water bottles
- Installing PIR (Passive Infrared) sensors to ensure that lights automatically switch off when rooms are not in use
- Remote lock/unlock of offices, reducing the need for G4S (Group 4 Securitor) staff to travel, morning and evening, to open and close offices
- Re-use of office furniture as opposed to buying new kit, including the re-upholstery of chairs
- Donating excess equipment and furniture into the provider community
- Better space utilisation within offices
- Implementation of recycling facilities
- Championing the use of double-sided, monotone printing as default
- Replaced roofing with a more efficient design that meets current building regulations

Carbon Management programme

The Skills Funding Agency has signed up to the Carbon Trust's Carbon Management scheme. It is one of 21 public sector bodies that have signed up to the Central Government Carbon Management Service pilot, including Local Authorities, Government departments and parts of the NHS. By committing to this programme, the Agency is demonstrating its engagement with the Government's sustainability agenda and carbon reduction targets.

Employment Experience

My role was quite varied; I started in the Data Service working within the Data Collections team, reporting to the Senior Application Manager and my job title was a Trainee MI Analyst. In this role I shadowed colleagues on how to use the application systems and used this to produce reports in Microsoft Excel. I also gained an insight into the Service Desk department and how they deal with customer queries. Next, I liaised with the Business Change Manager of a major transformation programme and worked on Stakeholder Management. A significant part of my role was working as a Benefits Analyst on Benefits Realisation Management. My responsibility was to facilitate the process for justifying the investment for the project. I liaised with key stakeholders in identifying the desired benefits. I quantified the value of the benefits to measure the return on investment. I used Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Visio in modelling benefit diagrams and creating forecasts. In my role I also wrote business documents such as conclusion papers, Benefits Management Strategy and the Benefits Realisation Plan. The work has involved critical thinking, analysis, logical and verbal and written communication skills.

As an Industrial Placement I also had the opportunity to participate in group tasks with the other Industrial Placement students at the Agency. For example, one of the tasks assigned was to present to the Senior Leadership team on our experience of the placement year. I have also contributed to the creation of Best Practice Guides for future Placements, Apprentices and Graduates and have written guidelines for the recruitment of new people. The organisation was very good in bringing all the Industrial Placements together through these group tasks. I also attended workshops arranged by internal staff on planning, project management and presentation skills. In addition to this I attended knowledge sessions open to the entire Agency including bitesize training sessions for learning and development. There are also many online training courses available which one can take with the agreement of their manager. I would recommend that you attend as many of these as possible because they are helpful in developing your personal skills and business knowledge.

On the social side, I had the opportunity to attend two different staff away days which were wonderful experiences to be part of. The first was an IM Services staff event and the second was an event for all of the Skills Funding Agency's staff nationwide. Both of these gave me a really useful insight into the Agency. I participated in various team building exercises which allowed me to improve my team work skills. Through these events I understood the wider impacts of the Agency. Throughout the year there were many opportunities to socialise with colleagues also. For example, I attended the Christmas lunch arranged by my team which was really enjoyable as well as separate Industrial Placement lunches collaboratively arranged.

The Recruitment process

The recruitment process was quite straightforward. A CV and cover letter was required to be sent to the person concerned in order to apply for the role. Around 2 weeks later I was contacted via email to attend an interview. For the interview I had to bring the required documentation to prove I was able to work in the UK. In advance, my advice would be to ensure that you have fully researched the company and if possible provide statistics in your discussion to create a good impression.

I was interviewed by two people, one was my current Line Manager and the other was another member from the Data Warehouse team within Data Service. The questions were based mainly around my CV and cover letter. Specifically, I was questioned around my background, modules being studied at university, work experience and extracurricular activities. Some of the questions I was asked were: Why do you want to work for us? What interested you to apply for this role? What do you know about Skills Funding Agency? What interests you to work in the Public Sector? What are your strengths and weaknesses? Have you done SQL before? This was assessing how much I knew about Skills Funding Agency and how strong my motivations were for applying.

I would advise that you have questions prepared for the interviewers in advance because this shows you are really interested and it expresses your enthusiasm for the role. For example, you could ask questions based on the work culture, training opportunities or graduate opportunities. If you tailor your questions to ask specific questions about the company this would be even more impressive.

After the interview, I was given a brief tour of the building and also had the chance to speak to a current placement student. This made me feel more at ease as she discussed her experiences with me and I had the opportunity to ask questions.

The Induction process

On my first day, I was given an introduction to people in my team, colleagues located around my area and other key people in the organisation which made me feel welcome. I was also given a tour around the whole office. I was allocated a desk and computer on arrival. My Line Manager informed me of what was expected from me and gave me general information important for me to be aware of. He notified me on flexible working, lunch times and other office rules such as dress down on a Friday.

I completed some essential learning courses compulsory as a new starter. These were:

- Introduction to Diversity and Equality
- Display Screen Equipment Assessment
- Manual Handling
- Health and Safety Awareness
- Protecting Information

This was a mandatory requirement as a new starter in a Civil Servant role.

I was given the first few weeks to research the company by: using the intranet, reading the Business Plan, reading the weekly internal bulletin and other relevant documents. More formally, there was an induction session with all the Industrial Placements where we were given a presentation providing an overview of the Agency and the IM Services division. We were briefed about; its role and purpose, its customers and background history. This was a great opportunity to meet other placement students and discover which area of the Agency they work within. We were given a group task at the end to present to the Senior Leadership team on our experience on the induction process and the first month of our role. In addition, I also went through a pilot Gifted Networking scheme in which my manager provided me with a list of useful contacts around the Organisation and I had to arrange meetings with them to better understand the Agency and different departments within it. This was very useful in understanding the Agency operationally and also to meet new people and build contacts.

A few weeks into employment I was required to set a few SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time bound) objectives for the year giving me something to work towards. These would then be reviewed half way through the year and at the end of the year in the performance appraisal as part of the official appraisal process.

Advice for future students

There is a staff car park located directly underneath and around the buildings. Access to the car park is by means of your security pass and as a permanent employee you have priority to park there. There is a restaurant and deli bar inside offering a range of different food with breakfast served on Fridays. The office is in a very convenient location within the city centre 5 minutes away from the railway station, town and nearby shops. The bus service is also very good with three different buses that pass the street frequently every 15 minutes. At lunchtime you can for a walk to town, to the nearby shops and shops surrounding the railway station as an alternative to eating within the canteen. Friday is a dress down day so wearing casual clothes is permitted. The SFA is very flexible with times so you can come in at a suitable time in the morning and complete your contracted hours and then leave as appropriate. Be enthusiastic and keen to learn and don't consider yourself to be any less than the permanent workers as you will be treated equally. Don't be afraid to challenge things. This would also create a good impression of you which demonstrates that you are taking your job seriously. If you are not satisfied with something I would recommend that you speak to your Line Manager as soon as possible to try to resolve the problem. Ask for further information if you are unsure of anything. You will need to be pro-active as your Line Manager is likely to be very busy so you should act to arrange regular one to one meetings reporting to them and obtaining feedback from them on your performance.