



2004 edition



Simple guide to key skills

Key Skills Support Programme

Department for Education and Skills

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Contents

What are key skills?	2
The key skills units	4
Communication	6
Application of number	7
ICT	8
Working with others	9
Improving own learning and performance	10
Problem solving	11
Assessment for key skills	14
The key skills tests	16
Useful contacts	18
Handy hints	19
Key skills and you	20

What are **key skills**?

Key skills are part of your apprenticeship. They are the skills used in all jobs and industries. There are six key skills. They are:

Communication

Why **key skills**?

Changes in work and technology mean that you need more than just the technical skills needed for the job. Employers are looking for people who can:

- **communicate well – in speaking and writing**

Application of number

- **use numbers to do calculations, pricing and measurements**

ICT

- **use new technology**

Working with others

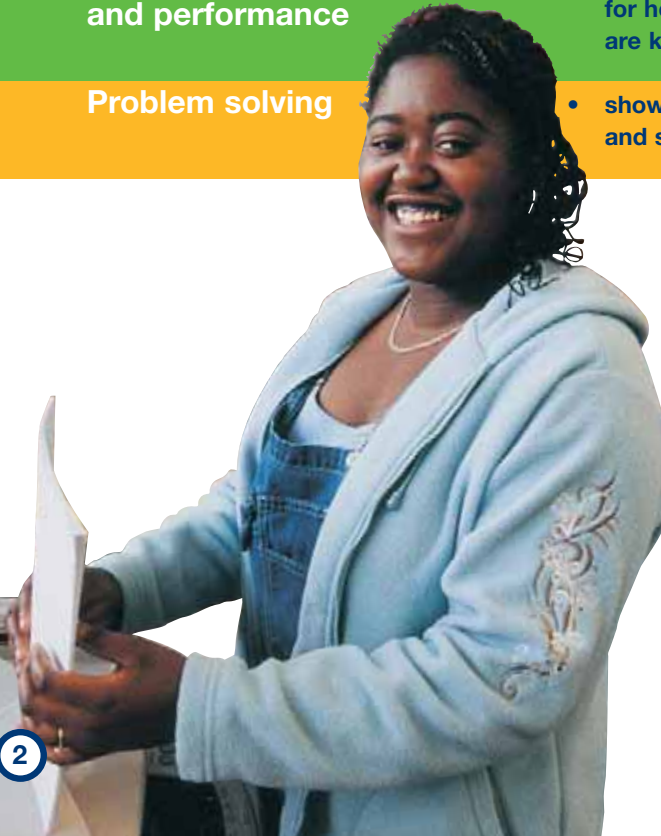
- **get on with other people and work as part of a team**

Improving own learning and performance

- **manage their own work, look for how they can improve and are keen to learn**

Problem solving

- **show initiative and recognise and solve problems.**



‘ Key skills go across the board – they’re in every job. ’



People who work well in groups, are well organised and can solve their problems are the people who get on best at work and get promoted. For example:

- **it's no good being a brilliant engineer if you can't communicate with clients and colleagues**
- **you won't get far as a chef if you can't manage the kitchen budget**
- **no one wants to work with someone who can't be part of a team.**

The point of key skills is that you use them in your work. Look out for chances to practise and develop them in your day-to-day work, as well as in training sessions or at college.

Your training provider will also have planned how they will make sure that key skills are part of your learning and assessment.

Key skills are applied

Skills like reading, spelling, calculating, using computers and so on become key skills when they are applied to real tasks. For example:

- You will have learned multiplication by doing sums or learning your tables – that's maths. But if you find out and compare the costs of transporting some goods by road or by rail, you will have to work out the distances involved, the rates charged by carriers or the cost if you did the job yourself. This means using the application of number key skill – you will use multiplication, but you will be applying it to your work.
- You would be using the key skills of communication, ICT **and** working with others if you had to read a report suggesting a new system at work, take part in a meeting to discuss it and put your point of view and then send an e-mail to a colleague about it.

The key skills units

Key skills units describe what you need to know and do to achieve your key skills. There is one unit for each key skill at different levels.

The unit is broken into two parts: Part A and Part B.

To see how a key skill unit works, look at the communication unit at level 2.

Part A of the unit spells out what you need to be able to do so that you can feel confident about applying your communication skills and producing evidence.



Part B is called 'You must' and describes the skills you must show. You must have evidence in your portfolio that you can do all the things in the list.

Your trainer will be able to show you a copy of the key skills units – or you could practise your ICT key skill by downloading them from the website of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority at www.qca.org.uk.

If you get your own copy of the units, you will know what the assessor will be looking for.

DON'T PANIC!!

Don't worry if you think you weren't very good at maths or English at school. No one expects you to be able to do everything at the start of your training. Your training provider is there to help you to

practise and improve your key skills and will give you the help you need with any aspect of spelling, arithmetic or computers.

And . . . because key skills are about applying things to the real world, you will probably find that things like English and maths make more sense and are easier and more interesting to learn.

Key skills levels

The key skills are at five levels. At this stage of your training, you will almost certainly be aiming at level 1, 2 or 3.

Level 1 *describes the skills that people use in routine situations and tasks that occur regularly at work.*

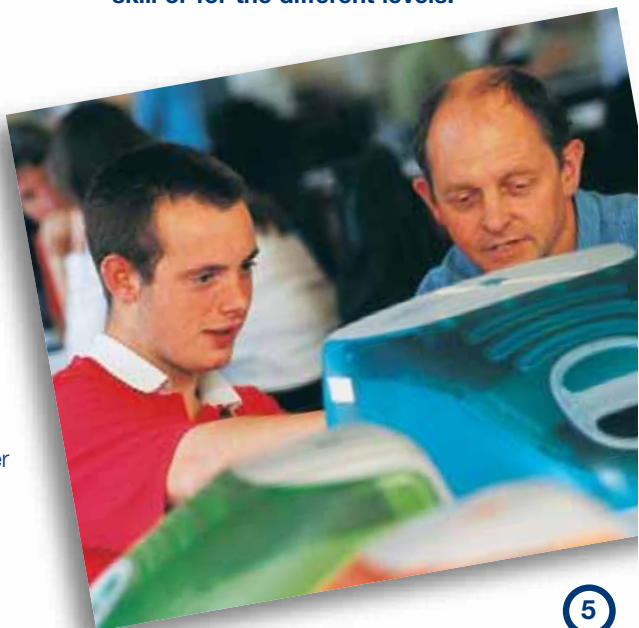
Level 2 *asks people to take more responsibility for some of the decisions about how to apply key skills.*

Level 3 *has more complex activities that involve reasoning and more personal responsibility for organising and carrying out tasks using key skills.*

Levels 4 & 5 *are generally for people with management or strategic responsibilities in an organisation.*

If you are an apprentice, the framework for your apprenticeship will specify which key skills you must do and at what level(s) in order to complete your apprenticeship.

The next part of the guide takes a closer look at each key skill. Our descriptions just give a general overview and summary – they do not go into all the detail of exactly what you have to do for each key skill or for the different levels.



Communication

Communication skills are important to all organisations. At work you will have to talk to colleagues and managers, follow instructions and read documents such as reports, health and safety information and so on.



‘ It’s every time you communicate in any way:

- talking***
- writing***
- e-mails. ’***



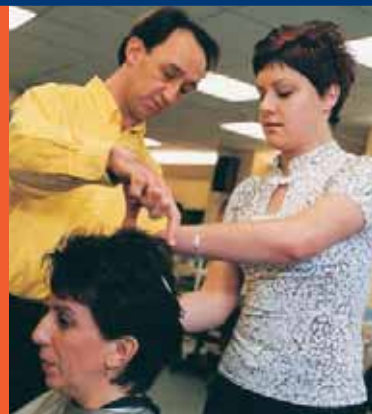
About the key skill

The communication key skill is about making sure you get the right messages from written and spoken communication and that you are able to get the right message across to others. It includes spelling, punctuation and so on, but it’s about much more than that – it’s about using these skills appropriately as part of your job.

What you might do

Here are the kinds of things you could do to practise or apply this key skill.

- Read health and safety instructions about a product or piece of equipment
- Discuss how to tackle a task with a work colleague
- Write a business letter or report



‘ Being able to talk to clients and put them at their ease is essential in my job. ’

Application of number

All organisations need people who can handle numbers and calculations accurately. Your job will involve you in using numbers in some way – you may need to handle money, calculate sales figures, measure, calculate costs or understand graphs or charts.



‘ It should be called “relevant maths”. ’

About the key skill

The application of number key skill isn't just about doing sums – it's about using maths in practical situations that are relevant to your work. For example, you may have learnt how to calculate percentages at school, but for the key skills you will apply this to things like working out discounts or VAT.

‘ I’m doing key skills through projects about wiring systems and pricing a house – that involves a lot of number work. ’



What you might do

Here are the kinds of things you could do to practise or apply this key skill.

- Read and understand a chart of sales figures
- Measure a room or area and draw a floor plan – for example, for a new display area or to plan storage
- Price a job or prepare an invoice

‘ It’s like maths but more about what people do every day . . . invoicing, pricing, discounts, VAT. ’

ICT

Successful businesses make good use of new technology – and they want the people who work in them to be confident about using computers and other kinds of information technology.



‘ Everyone uses IT in some way nowadays – for example, we have to print our timesheet from the computer. ’

About the key skill

The ICT (information and communication technology) key skill is about using IT to find, input, reorganise and present information. It means being able to find what you want on the internet or a database, sending e-mails, entering information on to a computer and presenting information using word processing or graphics programs. As with all the other key skills, the emphasis is on using your IT skills in a practical situation to do with your work.

‘ I’ve produced a poster and leaflet about our day trip for parents of children at the nursery I work in. ’

What you might do

Here are the kinds of things you could do to practise or apply this key skill.

- Find information for a project or your work from the internet or a database
- Use a spreadsheet to keep track of your personal finances or a project budget
- Write a letter, report or presentation using a word processing program



‘ I’ve been using laptops that they bring into the workplace and turning figures into graphs and bar charts – that’s the number key skill as well. ’

On-line catalogues **e-mails** accounts **spreadsheets** **CD-ROMs** the internet
sales figures posters **designs** cashflows *digital photos*
electronic diaries intranets voicemail **in-house computer systems**

Working with others

One of the most important qualities employers look for is the ability to work with other people. They know that good teamwork is a major factor in business success and that people who can work together to achieve objectives make a big contribution to this.

‘Doing your individual job within a team to get a bigger job done.’

About the key skill

Working with others is about being clear about your responsibilities and how these fit in with the organisation and the work of other people in your team. It's about working cooperatively and involves asking questions to find out what others would like you to do, carrying out tasks accurately, safely and on time. It also means asking for help or advice when you need it.

‘Knowing your own boundaries – not stepping on colleagues’ toes and knowing when you should pass something on to someone else.’



What you might do

Here are the kinds of things you could do to practise or apply this key skill.

- Help to organise an event or group project
- Agree what needs to be done and work cooperatively with other people
- Plan and do a job for a customer or client

‘Every day on the site we have to plan and work with other people like carpenters or bricklayers.’

Getting on with colleagues being considerate **group projects**
presenting products to customers helping to organise events **listening to progress reports**
offering help **asking for help with a problem** team meetings **helping to plan and organise a job**

Improving own learning and performance

Organisations are always looking for ways to improve their products and services and they want their staff to help them to do this. They need people who are keen to learn, are able to set and agree their own targets and able to find ways of improving their performance at work.

‘ The individual bit of quality improvement. How to improve your strengths . . . and your weaknesses even more! ’

About the key skill

Every time you do something that is new to you, you are improving your own learning and performance. This key skill helps you do this in a more planned way. It is all about setting targets, taking opportunities to learn and reviewing your learning and achievements. The evidence for this skill may come from your home or leisure activities as well as from work.



What you might do

Here are the kinds of things you could do to practise or apply this key skill.

- Plan to learn a new skill at work or a hobby and decide how you will go about it
- Keep a record of what you’ve learnt
- Review your progress with your trainer or tutor



‘ It means setting targets and monitoring achievement . . . finding learning opportunities. For example, I did health and safety and a first aid course. ’

Listening to feedback from colleagues and acting on it studying a subject **learning a new hobby** choosing a career **setting yourself a target** learning a new skill in your job **noticing a mistake and saying what you’d do differently**

Problem solving

Employers often say that they want their staff to use their initiative. That means being able to recognise problems and coming up with ideas about what to do about them. This can save the business time and money and avoid waste.

‘ Recognise the problem . . . that there is a problem. Decide what to do about it – including asking for help if you need it. Take the right course of action. ’

About the key skill

Problem solving involves identifying when there is a problem and thinking of different ways of tackling it. You then need to decide on a course of action, carry it out and check that it has worked. The problem won't necessarily be a major issue – if it is, the right course of action would probably be to tell a colleague or your supervisor. It is more likely to be something like running out of supplies, equipment failure or making changes to a plan that isn't achieving your planned result.



What you might do

Here are the kinds of things you could do to practise or apply this key skill.

- **Organising fresh supplies when you find you have run out**
- **Identifying an opportunity to reduce waste or costs**
- **Reorganising work when you are short-staffed**

Safety warning!!

Problem solving does not mean taking unnecessary risks or exceeding your responsibilities. You should discuss options and agree actions with an appropriate other person.

‘ Getting yourself out of a difficult situation and recognising when you need help. ’

Diagnosing faults *repairing equipment* **helping a customer**
organising an event **improving a system** *reducing waste* **finding extra information**
having a plan **sorting out the best way to send a delivery**

The key skills work **together**

You have probably noticed that a lot of activities at work involve more than one of the key skills. This is important – you do not have to treat each key skill separately.

For example:

If you deal with a customer's problem, you are using **communication** and **problem solving** skills.

If you prepare a report and produce it using a word processor, you are using **communication** and **IT** – and **application of number** as well if it has charts or figures in it.

‘Talking to others in your team means that communication can overlap with working with others.’

Some apprentices work on a lot of key skills at once by tackling a project to help improve their company's performance. For example, Carly is an apprentice in the office of a dental equipment company. Here's what she's doing.

‘I'm working on a new pricing system. We weren't making a profit from our subcontracted engineers so I've been looking at how much is charged by the engineers for callouts, how much we're charging and the profit on each job. I might follow it up with a survey of our customers to find out how much they'd be prepared to pay as a standard callout fee. When I've got all the information I'll write a report for my boss with recommendations about what we should do.’



Application of number

Gathering information, working out costs, distances, profit, fees, presenting data

Communication

Sources of information, one-to-one and group discussion, writing letters and the report

Working with others

Contacting customers, discussing the project with her boss, asking for advice

The project gives Carly a chance to put together evidence for all the key skills

ICT

Selecting information from the company database, presenting comparative costs using a chart or spreadsheet, inputting and formatting the report

Problem solving

The whole project is a problem solving exercise involving identifying and exploring the problem and coming up with ideas for solving it

Improving own learning and performance

Setting and agreeing targets for the work, reviewing progress



Assessment for key skills



There are **two** different kinds of assessment for key skills.

- ***You need to produce a portfolio containing evidence which shows that you can do everything the key skills units ask.***
- ***For communication, application of number and ICT you may also need to do a short test.***

Portfolios

Putting together a portfolio for key skills is very similar to what you need to do for an NVQ. It involves gathering evidence of where you have used the skills in a way that meets the standards.

You gather evidence in your work file. You then put each piece of assessed evidence into a portfolio which you build up until it contains all the evidence for your key skills.

Try to plan tasks or jobs that you think are suitable for producing key skills evidence. Your tutor or supervisor will help you with this. Talk about the work and training you will be doing and identify the best opportunities for you to produce the evidence you need.

One reason for having a plan is that assessors will often be looking for evidence of where you have applied a lot of the parts of the key skill in one activity or project.

‘ You do key skills every day. The difficulty is in spotting the evidence – to prove that you’ve done it. ’

But, as well as planning, remember that it is important to recognise examples of key skills when they happen, because you can't always predict what's going to come up each day – especially with problem solving.

How should I organise my portfolio?

It is important that your portfolio is well organised. You will need to find your way around it quickly and easily and so will other people. Normally, each piece of evidence has a reference number and a note explaining how it links to the key skills. Some organisations use a form for this but there isn't an official form that everyone has to use. There should also be an index at the front of the portfolio showing where you can find the evidence for each key skill.

You can put all your evidence for both the key skills and your NVQ into one portfolio – as long as it's easy for people to find the relevant evidence.

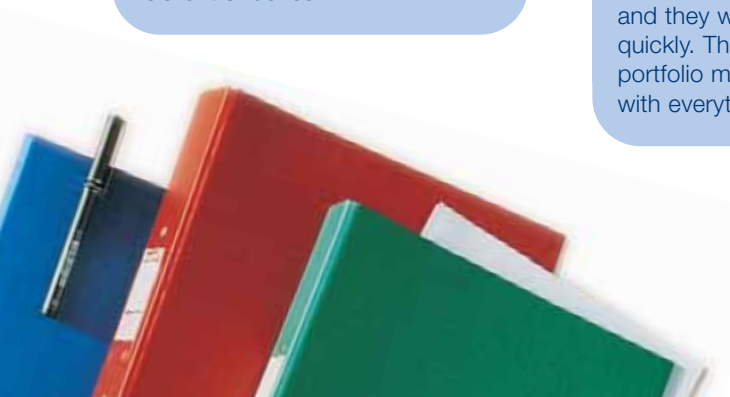
Who will see my portfolio?

The assessor. You probably know this person; they may be your tutor or trainer. They will assess each piece of evidence you produce to make sure it meets the standard.

The internal verifier. You may know this person too. They help to make sure that all the work in your centre is being assessed at the same standard.

The standards moderator/ external verifier. This person works for the awarding body which gives you your key skills certificates and qualifications. They work with several centres and their job is to make sure that work is being assessed to the same national standard at all centres. Either they will visit your centre or some portfolios will be posted to them.

All these people have to be able to find their way around your portfolio when you're not there to explain it to them. They want to know what they are looking for and they want to be able to find it quickly. That means that your portfolio must be well organised, with everything in its place.



The key skills tests

The tests are made up of questions about what's in Part A of the key skills units. You do not have to get all the questions right to pass.

What are the tests like?

There are separate tests for communication, application of number and ICT. The other three key skills are not tested in this way.

At levels **1** and **2** the communication and ICT tests last for an hour each, the application of number tests last 45 minutes.

You can get an idea of the kind of questions in the tests from sample test papers. These are on the QCA website and most awarding body websites. There are a lot of awarding bodies that cover key skills – but the test is national so it's always the same whatever awarding body is running it.

You may even get the chance to do tests on line. You do the test on a computer at a time that suits you and the centre. You will get quicker feedback on how you did.

If you don't pass first time, you can take the test again (a bit like a driving test). There are twelve test dates each year for levels 1 and 2 and six test dates for level 3, although not all awarding bodies run tests on all the dates. Your trainer or assessor will

There are 40 multiple-choice questions and each question is worth 1 mark.

At level **3** the tests last for one and a half hours each and the questions are worth a total of 50 marks. The questions are longer and more complex. For level 3 in ICT the test consists of a sequence of practical tasks and is done using a computer.

Working with others, improving own learning and performance and problem solving do not have a test and you only need to have a portfolio.

be able to tell you when the tests are available.

People who already have certain qualifications do not have to do the tests or, in some cases, the portfolio.

For example, if you have got GCSE Computing Grade A* to C, you do not have to do the test or the portfolio for ICT at level 2.

Qualifications which exempt people from the test are known as **proxy qualifications** or 'proxies'. QCA has a list of proxies on its website www.qca.org.uk.

' Don't worry, it's only a test – and you can take it again if you have to. '



Being **prepared**

The tests should not be like a step in the dark. You can do a lot to make sure you are ready to take them. Your training organisation will help you to prepare.

The best way to prepare for the tests is to look at past papers and to practise doing the questions.

If you find there are some types of questions you're always getting wrong – for example, punctuation or percentages – then you can plan to learn and improve those skills.

When will I take the tests?

The simple answer is 'When you are ready!' It will be up to you and your training provider to decide. Some apprentices will take the test early on in their apprenticeship, but it might suit others to wait till later. You may take the different key skills tests at different times. What is important is that you enter when you have the best chance of passing and that you leave time for a re-take if it is needed.

Assessment **checklist**

- **Plan where you can get key skills evidence**
- **Make sure your portfolio is well organised**
- **Give every piece of evidence a number**
- **Have an index and keep it up to date**
- **Make sure you practise and prepare for the tests and **don't panic****



Other organisations involved in key skills

Awarding body – an organisation which registers candidates and gives the key skills certificates and qualifications.

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) – the organisation which is responsible for the key skills units and accredits qualifications in England.

Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and the **Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA)** are now responsible, among other things, for apprenticeship frameworks (previously the role of National Training Organisations).

Useful contacts

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority www.qca.org.uk

Your awarding body

If you know the name of the awarding body you are registered with (ask your trainer), you can look at their website in order to find out about their approach to key skills.

Who can help?

You're not on your own when you do key skills. Your trainer and assessor will be the main people who work with you – but there are lots of others who can help.

Your employer – can make sure you get opportunities to practise and develop key skills at work.

Your work colleagues – can see you doing tasks that include key skills. Then they can sign a 'witness statement' which counts as evidence.

Other apprentices – you may do a key skills project or task with other apprentices. You can help each other by working together and sharing ideas.

People outside training – since key skills evidence can come from hobbies, interests or voluntary work as well as from work, you may get support from people in these areas of your life.

The Key Skills Support Programme

This is the programme that produced this guide. Although most of what we do is for trainers, rather than learners or apprentices, you will find a lot of general information on our website at www.keyskillssupport.net



Start your key tasks

- *Look for chances to use key skills in your day-to-day work*
- *Work out what your strengths and weaknesses are*
- *Remember – lots of things you do at work involve key skills*
- *A piece of evidence can count for more than one key skill*
- *Don't panic – ask for help if you need it*
- *Take the opportunity to do new things. For example, ask your employer for the chance to try out a new job or skill*
- *Practise and prepare for the tests*
- *If you're already doing a project at work, think about how you're using key skills*
- *If you need help with key skills, ask your trainer*



Key skills and **you**

You've seen examples of how **key skills** are used in different jobs – but how are they applied in your work?

Think of two examples from your job for each key skill.

Communication

1

2

Application of number

1

2

ICT

1

2

Working with others

1

2

Improving own learning and performance

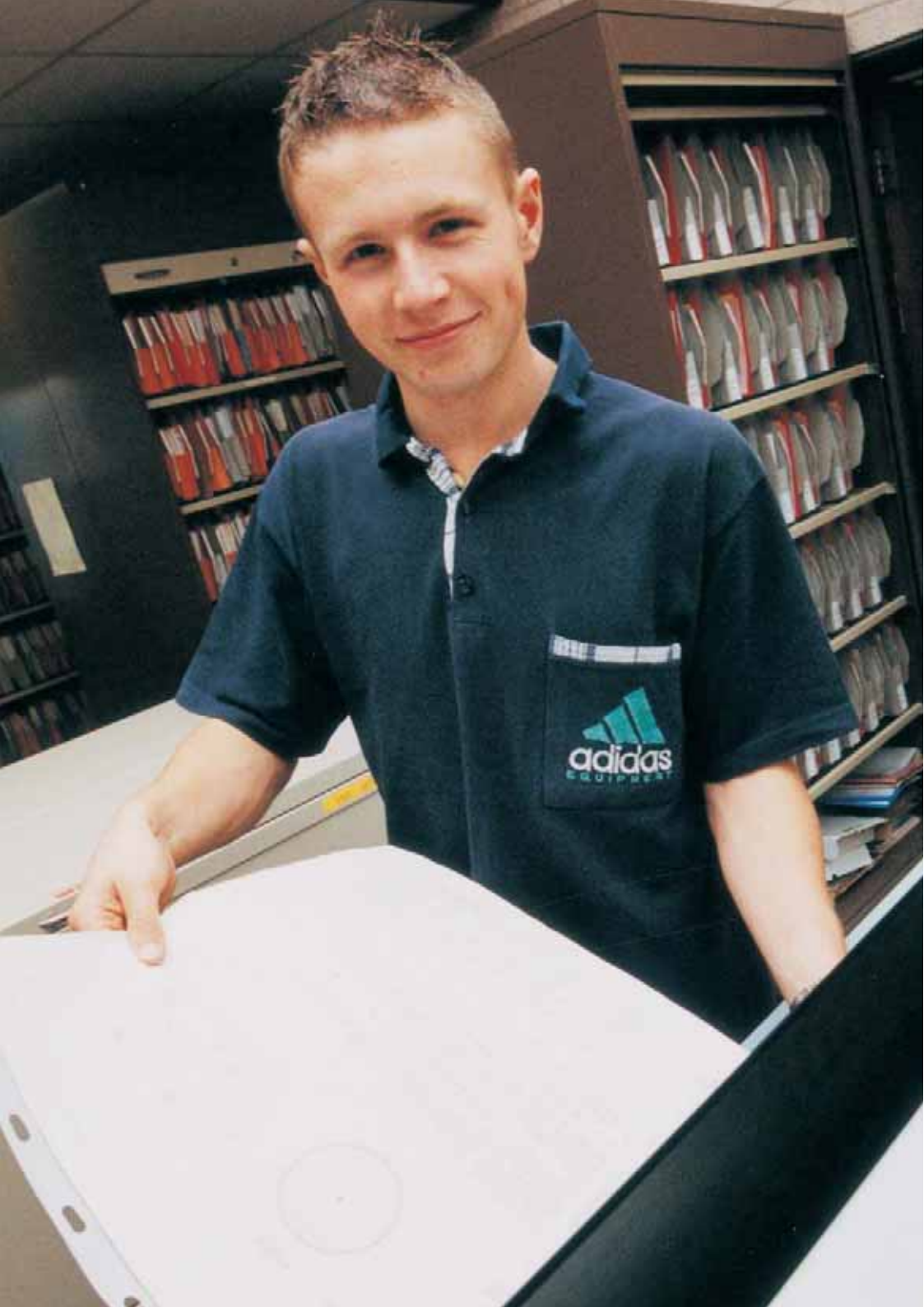
1

2

Problem solving

1

2



learning **forwork**

department for
education and skills
creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence

