



Our learning journey with BSI

The AA's Mark Braham explains the benefits of working with BSI as its standards training partner

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Mark Braham, *Head of Business Assurance*

At a glance:

The AA's six signs of training excellence

1. Inspirational tutors
2. Effective teaching techniques
3. Flexible structure and content
4. Conducive learning environment
5. Supportive provider relationship
6. 'Best in class' provision

Business background

The AA is one of Britain's best-known businesses, with its striking yellow and black livery familiar to drivers and non-motorists alike. Founded in 1905 and famous for roadside repair and recovery, today the AA offers a wide range of automotive and financial services. Headquartered in Basingstoke, the company now has over 7,000 employees and an annual turnover in excess of £900m.

In 2018 the AA completed several programmes with BSI Training, including lead auditor courses for three different management systems standards: ISO 9001 (Quality), ISO 14001 (Environmental Management) and ISO 45001 (Occupational Health & Safety). A number of AA managers attended each of these BSI Training programmes – alongside delegates from other organizations.



Here, Mark Braham, Head of Business Assurance at the AA, describes the AA's learning journey, highlighting six signs of training excellence – the distinctive characteristics of BSI's training provision that mark it out from the crowd.

Sign 1: Inspirational tutors

A key reason why we chose BSI as our training partner was that their tutors tend to come from industry. They've done the job – whether it's implementing or auditing management systems, they've been 'at the coal face' before becoming professional trainers, so they've got first-hand experience of how they are applied in practice. There's nothing worse than going on a course where the trainer has simply learnt the module and delivers what's in the book, with no understanding of the real-life requirements of different industry sectors.

The depth of the tutors' understanding of both the management systems and the certification requirements of the standards was truly impressive. They have been steeped in their specialist area for years, often decades, so they have the answers businesses need. They could actually tie in links to our own service industry through their in-depth knowledge and experience. They could relate the learning to

situations our managers face in their day-to-day roles, bringing the issues to life for them.

All three of our BSI tutors were likeable, engaging individuals, putting us at ease and making it easy to build a good rapport with them. Importantly, they also had the communication skills to get key messages across really effectively.

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Sign 2: Effective teaching techniques

BSI's courses use 'accelerated learning'. In practice, this means 'learning by doing', rather than the traditional 'chalk and talk' classroom approach to training. It's a highly practical approach that has been shown to improve knowledge retention and reduce the amount of training time required. For us, it included a lot of role-plays involving the whole group. To be honest, I have never liked role-play, but for this type of subject, which can be a bit dry, you really can't beat it – certainly not by filling every minute of every module from a textbook or with 'death by PowerPoint'!

The advantage of these open programmes was that they allowed our managers to listen and learn from the experiences of other delegates in other industries, as well as from the tutors. For example, as a service business, one measure of quality for us might be our roadside response times, whereas for delegates involved in, say, rail infrastructure it might be the reliability of tracks or signals. Learning how the standards are applied in different industries made the programmes much more informative and engaging.

That said, I wouldn't rule out in-house training in the future – which could bring different benefits by shaping content specifically for the AA. It's something we're considering, and BSI is well equipped to provide as part of the cohesive learning pathway it offers.

We were also encouraged to role-play with the delegates from our own organization, which gave us some really helpful insights into how aspects of auditing the management systems would be perceived in our own business.



Sign 3: Flexible structure and content

The courses were very well structured, but not constraining. There was flexibility, allowing the right timing for various activities and breaks. For example, we had breakout sessions ranging from 10-60 minutes to conduct exercises in small groups of 3-4 people on specific topics. We prepared our own presentations, which we then delivered to the tutor and all the other participants. For some delegates this took them outside their comfort zone – though not so much for my team, which is very experienced – and it was rewarding to watch them gradually build up their skills and confidence.

The presentations led to a critique of our methods and to a discussion of how these could be improved. It really reinforced the clause-by-clause approach that you need to take to fully comply with a standard's particular requirements and reap maximum value from the management system.

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There was also flexibility in terms of content – so, for example, where necessary there was an element of pure knowledge transfer to ensure all delegates were up to date on the requirements of the latest versions of the standards. But for these lead auditor courses there was much more emphasis on improving skills in conducting an audit.

Sign 4: Conducive learning environment

Most of the venues were exceptional – like stately homes converted into hotels – with large rooms, breakout areas with comfortable seating, gyms and lovely grounds. They provided a really pleasant environment in which to learn and mix with other delegates.

We'd have 2-3 hours of homework each evening after the classes, but there was still time to go to the gym or the bar – or both – to unwind and bond as a group.

The ability to meet and network with each other was a significant benefit, aiding our learning through informal conversations and creating valuable contacts for the future. People who were very quiet on the Monday were good buddies by the end of the week, going for a beer and exchanging email addresses.

Sign 5: Supportive provider relationship

The support we received from BSI was absolutely fantastic from start to finish. This went beyond their outstanding tutors to include their account managers and administrators. There are some training providers who hammer you with marketing and sales approaches, but BSI's service has been professional, well co-ordinated and not at all onerous.

"BSI knows standards better than anyone else and offers the widest range of courses. They don't just offer 'Package A' or 'Package B', but are a very capable, responsive outfit who will flex to your requirement and offer a joined-up solution."

I particularly liked the fact that we had consistency of contact with the same BSI account manager throughout our whole learning journey. This meant they got to know us really well, understanding the particular challenges of our industry and helping us resolve any issues as soon as they arose.

Sign 6: 'Best in class' provision

When you engage with BSI as your training provider, it not just BSI Training you're getting – but the strength behind the whole BSI brand. As the UK's leading certification body they've got the support of technical experts and subject matter specialists – people who have been steeped in standards from initial conception and drafting right through to certification. And they offer so much more that businesses want – from business improvement and training to governance and assurance – so they have the infrastructure to support clients with whatever they need.

A BSI certificate carries a lot of weight. If someone in our industry enquires about our capability, we show them our BSI qualifications. It negates the need for a lot of other questions, because they're regarded as the best.

It is such a trusted brand. If I had to sum BSI up in two words, they would be "quality" and "credibility".

Find out more

Put your learning into context with a blend of classroom teaching, workshops and interactive sessions. And let us transfer our expertise to your business

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