6 Methodology: Study One

6.1 Introduction to Study One

According to the literature reviewed in chapter 2, an effective Learning Organisation will share information openly across hierarchical, departmental and geographic boundaries. The Learning Organisation seeks to achieve competitive advantage by innovation and experimentation, challenging the status quo and encouraging continuous learning from sources within and outside the organisation fostering continuous individual and organisational development. Above all the Learning Organisation has to operate as a single interacting entity avoiding a "silo mentality" (Rod Eddington, CEO, British Airways - staff communication October 2001). During the literature review process, it became evident that there was a lack of conclusive evidence as to whether Organisational Learning Facilitators (OLF$s$) were competencies or not, and no general consensus regarding their definitions. No current literature was able to provide a competency-based model of OL, or to explain how OLF$s$ might interact.

The primary aim of Study One was to operationalise the OLF$s$ required for Organisational Learning within a large multinational organisation and explore any conceptual interrelationship that may exist between them.

6.2 Sample

All the participants in Study One were employees of British Airways. They were approached directly by the researcher. Of the thirty people approached, twenty volunteered to take part in the first study. These participants received an e-mail, outlining the purpose of the research and requesting their permission to be interviewed. The method was explained to them and were advised about the time needed to conduct the interview. In addition, it was pointed out that the research
would be conducted anonymously and in confidence, and participants were reassured they could withdraw from the research at any time. E-mails were addressed to the participants directly. These offered a secure method of communication, as each employee had sole access to her e-mails by means of an individual password.

The sample was taken from British Airways located at London’s Heathrow and regional Airports. British Airways total employee population size was ca. 65,000. As a result of the constraints described in section 6.1, not all departments could be represented in Study One. The participating departments in this study were Flight Operations, Customer Services and Ground Operations, Information Management, Finance, Engineering, People, Strategy, Sales, Marketing and Purchasing. The sample size comprised 10 managers and 10 non-management staff. This management/non-management split was designed to elucidate both managers’ and non-managers’ perceptions of the OLFS.

At management level, British Airways was comprised 8 layers, namely: Manager (MG), Senior Manager (SM $\alpha$, $\beta$, $\lambda$ and $\delta$), Director, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Chairman. Below management are 8 grades. These grades are one professional performance managed grade (APPG) and 7 administrative grades (A1 – A7).

6.3 Sampling

Sampling was not undertaken on a departmental basis because it was not possible as a result of organisational constraints imposed on the research, but by a management/non-management dichotomy. The sampling method used for this study was purposive in order to obtain as many views across departments in British Airways as possible. Selection of non-management grades was by quota sampling to ensure that all job grades were represented. With each participant, perceptions of all OLFS identified in the literature were explored.
6.4 Method

The method used for this study was qualitative and is that used as a result of the constraints, described in section 6.1. The nature of the qualitative research, however, allowed data reduction and enabled the data to be displayed, both through extended text and diagrammatically, in order to facilitate its understanding. A semi-structured interview was used covering the Organisational Learning Facilitators (OLFs) identified in the literature, which were discussed in chapter 2. The interviews took approximately 45 minutes and located away from the participant's office to avoid distractions and ensure privacy. The aim of the interview was to operationalise these factors in an organisation and to verify that they could be measured. The interview protocol is given in Appendix A (page 184). The questions were framed in an open-ended approach using a semi-structured interview, which allowed participants to talk about their own experiences or those of colleagues. This indirectly increased the pool of people about whom information was elicited. The probing questions following each main question were used as a guide for the researcher.

The interviews had to be conducted between June and December 1999 and was the period just before Robert Ayling stepped down as Chief Executive after 4 years in the post and Rod Eddington, the new Chief Executive starting with British Airways on 1st May 2000. During this period British Airways entered a period of major change, which included restructuring and reduction of the headcount through voluntary severance.

6.5 Study One: Pilot

Prior to interviewing participants an initial interview protocol was written and six volunteers from the British Airways Recruitment Department were used for a pilot study. Four were involved in piloting the first draft and two for the final version. These volunteers did not form part of the final sample. The volunteers from the Recruitment Department were used because of their extensive interview
experience and were, therefore, best placed to provide any feedback with regard to the interview’s introduction, the content of the opening and probing questions, the length of the interview, the flow of the questions (i.e. do the questions seem to fit together and follow in a logical order) and whether the respondents were interested in the subjects discussed so as to avoid unconsidered or, indeed, unreliable answers. The volunteers were specifically asked to consider the points described above which are consistent with De Vaus’s (1995) guidelines when piloting questions for interview or questionnaires.

Some changes were required as a result of the pilot study. The interview exceeded the thirty minutes laid down by British Airways and given that the original design of the research was affected (e.g. small sample size for Study One, a structured interview rather than unstructured had to be conducted) it was necessary to include the OLFs outlined in chapter 2. The final length of the interview was 45 minutes and the volunteers did not consider that this was excessive. Volunteers found the introduction reassuring and professional. Also, the research was positioned as doctoral research, not a corporate initiative, and participants appeared eager to be open and disclose information given the impartiality of the researcher. During the debriefing session some participants stated that they were pleased that someone took an interest in hearing their points of view. In the debriefing session all volunteers found the topics discussed interesting, relevant and none found the questions difficult or ambiguous. All volunteers said that the sequence of questions flowed well and made the interview feel more relaxed.

In the initial protocol, the open questions with reference to Organisational Learning and Learning Organisations were the first to be asked. During the pilot study participants suggested that these should be placed last so that when responding to questions with regard to the OLFs they did not try to think of answers in relation to concepts that they may not be familiar with. Also, if the participants were unfamiliar with the concepts of Organisational Learning and Learning Organisations, they may feel that they were being interviewed rather
than in a discussion contributing to research and feel more self-conscious about their beliefs based on experience. The final draft, therefore, included these questions at the end of the interview.

Two volunteers commented that the questions with regard to Continuous Learning and Continuous Development seemed the same and questioned whether it was necessary to cover both topics, one volunteer said they were distinct and the fourth suggested that they were related. The two questions for these topics were not changed as it was important to establish whether Continuous Learning and Continuous Development were indeed different, related or one and the same in British Airways.

Two volunteers were used to pilot the final version of the interview protocol for Study One. No further changes were required as a result of this pilot study.

6.6 Interview Analysis

Qualitative research allows for in depth analyses of data that lead to serendipitous findings and to new integrations; they help to get beyond initial conceptions and to generate or revise conceptual frameworks (Miles & Huberman, 1994). However, there are some pervasive issues with qualitative data and their analysis. Miles (1979b) argues that a serious and central difficulty in the use of qualitative data is that methods of analysis are not well formulated.

The approach to qualitative data analysis for Study One was data reduction, presenting it and drawing any conclusions or verification. The purpose of Study One was to operationalise the OLFs in the current organisational learning literature and not to draw any conclusions. Given the constraints placed on the sample size for Study One the analysis of the data had to be rigorous while ensuring that any overstatement of the findings was avoided. However, apposite patterns, themes, explanations, causal flows and propositions were reported. Any conceptual frameworks that emerged out of the data were also reported.
The data were analysed via content analysis using the key OLFs as the semi-structured interview schedule items for initial coding categories. A further coding procedure, proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985), was adopted once the data started to be analysed in order to maintain rigour of analysis because of the constraints imposed on Study One. Four operations were involved in coding for Study One and these were: “filling in” where codes were added or reconstructed into a coherent scheme as new insights from the data emerged; “extension” where data coded earlier were interrogated in a new way, with a new theme, construct, or relationship; “bridging” where new relationships within units were seen or not previously understood; “surfacing” where new categories were identified (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Categories with considerable overlap, for example Continuous Learning and Development, were combined to make a new composite category, particularly where, from the perspective of participants, theoretical differentiation of these constructs in the literature was not matched by differentiation in practice.

Given the constraints on the research and the fact that the researcher was an employee of the organisation it was important to ensure that data collection was objective and that any risks to weakening the data were minimised. Two approaches to this were taken. First, in order to strengthen the data, Bogdan & Taylor (1975) recommended that the data should be seen or reported first hand, that behaviour and/or activities should be observed, that the fieldworker should be trusted by the organisation and the participants and finally that the data should be collected informally.

The researcher conducted the interviews and the participants reported first hand their observations of behaviour and activities in the organisation. The researcher used only the participants’ observations rather than his own to remain detached from the organisation and the sample. The participants appeared to be quite candid with their responses and were open and willing to share information with the interviewer. Indeed, they were very keen to express their opinions, and genuinely happy that someone wanted to talk to them confidentially. It was
assumed from this that the participants trusted the researcher. The interviews were conducted privately on a one-to-one basis away from the participant place of work, usually the researcher’s office building in small meeting rooms.

To further secure that data quality was optimised, triangulation was used to avoid any biases of the researcher as an employee of the organisation. A second fieldworker was used for analysis. The second fieldworker was another employee of the organisation with seventeen years in service and therefore knew the organisation well. Any comments or examples that the primary researcher may not be familiar with could be explained by the second fieldworker. Also, the second fieldworker analysed some of the transcripts independently and the results were compared with those of the primary researcher. The findings corroborated those of the primary researcher.