7 Results: Study One

The purpose of Study One was to investigate whether the key themes in the Organisational Learning (OL) literature were relevant, valued and viewed as important by people in British Airways. Study One was also undertaken to obtain operational definitions of core Organisational Learning Facilitators (OLFs), so as to identify ways in which OLFs could be defined and recognised in practice. In the course of the Participants, participants also discussed how British Airways operated in the light of these OLFs. However, as this was beyond the interest of this particular research, analysis was focused on operationalising the OLFs identified in the literature in British Airways.

The qualitative data obtained from the Participants in Study One were analysed using the method of analysis and coding procedures outlined in section 6.6. This Results chapter explores first an initial step towards developing a conceptual competency framework for Organisational Learning (OL). This was obtained by content analysing each Organisational Learning Facilitator (OLF) in terms of what it meant to the participants in British Airways. The results were brought together to provide a conceptual framework of OL for British Airways only. Using this conceptual framework as a basis, quantitative research was conducted to devise a final, factorially derived competency framework in Study Two.

Typical participant responses concerned the organisation’s need to work as one unit or system, to communicate and to be able to learn and develop in order to keep ahead of its competitors. Even though there was inevitable overlap and interaction amongst the key elements, it was possible to categorise the qualitative data obtained into four broad themes following the content analysis of the Participants (full Participant transcripts are available in Appendix E in Volume Two of this thesis). The results are presented as the four main themes, with the OLFs relevant to each theme. The thirteen OLFs represent the topics raised for discussion by the researcher using the semi-structured interview schedule.
(Appendix A, page 193). The structure of the results for Study One is given below.

**Theme 1: Communication**

OLF: Sharing Information I & II Feedback

**Theme 2: Learning**

OLF: Continuous Learning & Development Learning from Others

**Theme 3: Competitive Orientation**

OLF: Empowerment Experimentation with Ideas Creativity Competitor Awareness Acting on Information Questioning Everyday Routine

**Theme 4: Systems Thinking**

OLF: Cross-functional Awareness Systems Thinking

### 7.1 Towards Competency Framework for Organisational Learning

The results presented below are those obtained by Participants and compared with the Organisational Learning Facilitators’ (OLFs) definitions, which were discussed in chapter 2. Following each OLF is a description based on participant responses, followed by illustrative quotes from the Participants with participants. Participant numbers were used to ensure anonymity, but departments and job grade were reported. Participants’ comments are presented in quotes. These were then related to OLFs discussed in the literature.
7.1.1 Theme 1: Communication

According to the literature, OL requires open communication and the sharing of information across all parts of the organisation. Feedback is also essential in order for learning to occur. This proposition was fully endorsed by all participants. Perhaps the most notable finding relating to communication was the universal recognition of its importance, and the unanimous disappointment in the quality of communication experienced by participants.

7.1.1.1 Sharing Information

The topic of Sharing Information was raised to examine communication issues. Participants were asked to provide any examples of sharing information they had experienced within British Airways. The most commonly proffered examples were of intra-departmental communication.

Although British Airways is a global company, there was little evidence of information being shared across geographic boundaries. Only one participant spoke about including employees from other departments in their team meetings. The comments about Sharing Information also highlighted the link with openness and trust. Although the literature stressed the importance of linking openness and trust (e.g. Ulrich et al, 1993), only one participant (Participant 17 cited below) demonstrated this connection.

Most other comments related to experiences of information being shared up and down the hierarchy or at least beyond one level in the organisation, consistent with the proposition of Ulrich et al (1993) and McGill et al (1992). Participants responses indicated that their understanding of shared information centred on communication of business information. This included briefings on management team meetings, new products and promotions, the performance and strategy of the Airline (e.g. Participant 2 and 11 cited below).
Participant 2 (Management – Strategy): “...The nature of the information is all sorts of initiatives and changes which have been going on...the overall big picture about the budget strategy...”.

Participant 5 (Management – Corporate Communications): “…I even invite colleagues from other departments to join my team meetings so they can get an understanding of my section...saves time booking time with them to brief them...”.

Participant 11 (Non-management – Customer Services): “…we get updates from the management meeting every week and keeps us abreast with what is going on in the business (promotions, Airline performance, if we’ve been in the news)”. 

Participant 17 (Non-management – Engineering): “…shared information was very open...was very easy to ask questions. There was a lot of trust there...”.

As OL requires theoretically that information be shared effectively (McGill et al, 1992) participants were asked how well information was shared. The responses were mixed, as examples of which are cited in Participant 4, 14 and 15 below demonstrate.

Participant 4 (Management – Customer Services Terminal 4 LHR): “…receive and pass on information all the time. Information is shared every am and pm...mainly to pass on any information they need to know for the day.”

Participant 14 (Non-management – Telephone Sales): “…sharing information in the sense ‘these are my ideas, I would like you to do this’. If you suggest something it’s ‘that’s a good idea but...’ and they give you some fob off about why it still has to be their way...”.

Participant 15 (Non-management – Sales Product Distribution): “…just hold on to everything and not tell you that something is going on...”.

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Participants reported that communication was not as open as it could be and insisted that learning cannot occur unless information and ideas are shared across any one of a number of boundaries (Ulrich et al, 1993). It is suggested therefore, that Sharing Information I and II (discussed in chapter 2) and Open Communication may be closely linked.

The participant responses suggested that Sharing Information, as described in the literature and discussed in section 2.1.7 and 2.1.8, is necessary and valued by British Airways’s employees.

7.1.1.2 Feedback

Participants associated feedback with communication. Feedback was identified as an OLF because this views feedback as a process of communication which may be used to encourage people to contribute to the running of the company (Argyris, 1994; Gephart et al, 1996; Iles, 1997).

Participants were asked when they had either given feedback or received feedback or both. Participant responses were around performance management, development and recognition. Managers reported examples of feedback mainly around performance management and they spoke of motivating staff (Participant 4 cited below). Participant comments were around performance management with the aim of improving performance, development and recognition, illustrated by Participants 4, 15 and 16 below.

Participant 4 (Management – Customer Services Terminal 4 LHR): “...The performance management we deal with at the moment is either recognition or dealing with particular issues...recognise people for their work...”.

Participant 14 (Non-management – Telephone Sales): “...feedback was about
succeeding and recognition...”.

Participant 15 (Non-management – Sales Product Distribution): “...job related with a view to improving performance if necessary... to give each other a clear idea of what we want to achieve...”.

Participant 16 (Non-management – Customer Services and Ground Operations): “...I was learning about the things that I do well... and asked me for my input so it was dialogue not just telling...”.

Participant responses linked Feedback to Sharing Information. Sharing Information and Feedback were also linked to Continuous Learning and Development. Participant responses did not confirm the theory of encouraging people to contribute to the running of the organisation (Ulrich et al, 1993). However, participant comments for Feedback did suggest that responsibility for its provision should not rest solely with managers but involve employees. Participant comments suggested that Feedback is necessary and valued by employees.

7.1.2 Theme 2: Learning

Theme Two incorporated three aspects of OL, namely: Continuous Development, Continuous Learning and Learning from Others. Participants were clearly very keen to learn, develop their skills and get ahead of competitors. They did not want to remain stagnant. All participants recognised that Learning was an important aspect in British Airways. However, like communication in Theme One above, there was unanimous disappointment at the lack of learning opportunities and the way in which British Airways paid ‘lip service’ to learning and development.
7.1.2.1 Continuous Development

Questions around Continuous Development and Continuous Learning sought first to establish whether employees engaged in activities for continuous improvement and second, whether Continuous Development and Continuous Learning are different and viewed as different by employees.

Participants spoke of Continuous Development as being clearly defined and planned, and as an opportunity to build on knowledge and experience in their jobs. Continuous Development was more role-related than Continuous Learning. Participants spoke of courses as a desirable means of keeping up to date with their skills or acquiring new ones. Participants also spoke of Continuous Development as an outcome of performance feedback, an example of which is cited in Participant 16 below.

**Participant 16 (Non-management – Customer Services and Ground Operations):**
"...you will get feedback on your performance to help you develop and to understand the areas that you need to develop...it's very hard to develop continuously without getting the feedback aspect of the learning cycle...".

Participants mentioned that Continuous Development was about each individual’s responsibility to pursue his or her development. This is consistent with the OLF ‘Responsibility for One’s Own Learning’ which looks at the opportunity for employees to have the independence to manage their own learning and to be responsible for their own development within the organisation (Argyris, 1994), illustrated in Participants 3 and 17, cited below.

**Participant 9 (Management – Flight Ops):** "...taking ownership for how you want to develop either your career or personally...goal setting and checking your own standards...".
Participant 3 (Management – Purchasing and Contracts): “Development occurs in everything you do in your work...it's critical...people have to take on responsibility for their own development...”.

Participant 17 (Non-management – Engineering): “...ensure that your own staff take their own responsibility and that as a manager they take responsibility for ensuring that you get the most out of somebody...”.

Most participants indicated that Continuous Development was important; one participant commented: “you need to develop to survive corporately because you'll remain stagnant and out of touch...” (Participant 5 Non-management – Sales Product Distribution). The response given by participants in Participants was consistent with the literature’s suggestion that OL is important for competitive advantage and survival in a dynamic economic environment (Garratt, 1987, Dodgson, 1993, Pearn, Rodderick & Mulrooney, 1995, Pedler, Boydell & Burgoyne, 1989; Pedler et al, 1997).

The results suggest that Continuous Development is necessary and valued by employees.

7.1.2.2 Continuous Learning

Continuous Learning was introduced as a topic in order to discover whether it was seen as different from Continuous Development and whether people engaged in it. Participants said that Continuous Learning was broader and less specific than Continuous Development. Some participants suggested that Continuous Learning encourages you to do your best. Participants also suggested that learning does not necessarily guarantee career development. However, Continuous Learning was closely linked to development. Some participants reported that Continuous Learning was what happens when one reflects on what has gone wrong. Other participants reported that they could not see any difference between Continuous
Learning and Continuous Development. Examples are cited in Participants 3, 4 and 15 below.

**Participant 3** (Management – Purchasing & Contracts): "... *learning is part of development... you learn about it but you realise you don't want to develop in the area...*”.

**Participant 4** (Management – Customer Services Terminal 4): "... *It overlaps with continuous development... you are learning all the time... by experience at work...*”.

**Participant 17** (Non-management – Customer Services and Ground Operations): "... *It's learning things that aren't necessarily role related. What you gain though is a way of thinking...*”.

**Participant 15** (Non-management Sales - Product Distribution): "... *I think learning and development are the same thing...*”.

Participant responses to the question of Continuous Learning indicated that there was considerable overlap with Continuous Development. Consequently the OLF should be renamed Continuous Learning and Development. Participants mentioned that it was each individual’s responsibility to pursue his/her own development and learning, in a similar way to participant responses for Continuous Development in section 7.1.2.1 above. This is consistent with the literature and the OLF ‘Responsibility for One’s Own Learning’. Participants also reported that it was part of the managers’ role and responsibility to provide guidance and support to develop their people. Participant responses suggested that Continuous Learning is a necessary commodity, much valued by employees.
7.1.2.3 Learning from Others

Learning from Others constituted one of the component technologies that Senge (1990) claimed was necessary for the development of OL. Questions on the subject of Learning from Others explored "the ability for individuals collectively to produce extraordinary results and allow individual members to grow more rapidly than they could otherwise [because] Team Learning may be more important in a company than individual learning because without it, the organization wouldn't learn" (Senge, 1990; p. 10). In order to ascertain whether Team Learning occurs it is important to establish whether individuals are learning from each other.

Participants reported that Learning from Others does occur, though not consistently. Participants commented that intra-company learning occurred within occupational sub-groups; that is, managers learnt from other managers and non-managers from non-management colleagues, but that one group seldom learnt from the others. Some participants reported that Learning from Others happened all the time and saw it as linked to Continuous Development. Participants also reported that it did not happen as much as it should. Some non-management participants reported that it was not clear that managers had learnt from others, and if they had, their learning was not shared with non-management. Some participants reported that learning was not encouraged, or was lacking altogether. Examples of comments made by participants with regard to Learning from Others are cited in Participants 2, 4, 11 and 18 below.

Participant 2 (Management – Strategy): "...at the moment in my new role as manager, just trying to pick up everything really...I have sought out people and said 'look – I've been asked to do this but I haven't got a clue...'.

Participant 4 (Management - Customer Services Terminal 4): "...All the time. Constantly...you have to...everyday is different...I really had to learn quickly...".
Participant 11 (Non-management – Customer Services): “...You're learning all the time. From the ticketing project I became aware of some aspects of the job and contract law, particularly with suppliers...”.

Participant 18 (Non-management - Database Systems): “...you have to have people willing to share their knowledge...Learning from each other should be encouraged...”.

Participant comments gave support to the Team Learning theory proposed by Senge (1990). Moreover, the responses from participants also suggested that Learning from Others may be linked to Sharing Information (in this context it would be sharing knowledge). Participants statements suggested, therefore, that Learning from Others was important and valued by employees.

7.1.3 Theme 3: Competitive Orientation

Competitive Orientation encompassed a number of OLFs relating to the improvement of the organisation by such means as empowering employees, encouraging creativity, experimenting with ideas, being aware of competitors and acting on information to get ahead of competitors. Participants also discussed the questioning of the status quo. Participants stated that these OLFs were important and necessary in a competitive environment, but again there was disappointment with the lack of encouragement of some of these OLFs in British Airways.

7.1.3.1 Empowerment

Empowerment is associated with those teams which manage their daily practices collaboratively (Dovey, 1997). Appelbaum & Gallagher (2000) suggest that Empowerment contributes to the Learning Organisation and that it leads to a culture of shared power. Participants reported that Empowerment was a useful and practical method of management. The majority of participants reported that Empowerment gave responsibility and ownership to employees. Empowerment
was also viewed as a learning opportunity that built trust and provided encouragement as illustrated by Participants 4, 5, 12 and 13 below.

**Participant 4** (Management – Customer Services Terminal 4): “...part of development I empower less experienced people so they learn – often through mistakes...”.

**Participant 5** (Management – Corporate Communications): “...empowerment is about equipping people before empowering them...it [empowerment] gives them credibility, confidence to deliver what is being asked of them...”.

**Participant 12** (Non-management – Information Systems): “...my manager empowers me on a daily basis...always giving me responsibility for things...I think you have to set a level of trust with your people...”.

**Participant 13** (Non-management – Flight Operations): “...it’s good in a sense of development...and improvement because it gives people something new to think about and [makes them] feel they have a certain amount of responsibility...”.

A number of participants reported that Empowerment was a useful and practical method of management. Other participants reported that Empowerment is important in supporting and facilitating OLFs such as Creativity, Experimentation of Ideas, Questioning Everyday Routine and Acting on Information. Moreover, employees said that if Continuous Learning and Development is to take place, they needed to be empowered more.

**7.1.3.2 Experimentation of Ideas**

The questioning around the topic of Experimentation of Ideas was designed to investigate the participants’ willingness to innovate and try out new ideas.
Experimentation of New Ideas is associated with innovation and is an indication of competitiveness as proposed by McGill et al (1992) and Ulrich et al (1993).

Participants were asked to provide examples of occasions when they had tried out a new idea. Participants spoke of hot-desking, e-working and new ways of selecting prospective employees. Some participants stated that in order to achieve change and get ahead, experimenting with ideas was necessary, as this increased competitive advantage, illustrated by Participants 2, 4, 5 and 12 cited below. Some examples given by participants showed where ideas had been tested with a view to gaining competitive advantage (e.g. Participant 2, cited below).

Participant 2 (Management – Strategy): "...it gave us a competitive advantage...we got more support from the line because they actually saw a tangible result...taking people’s ideas and listening to them, capturing the information, publicising and communicating it afterwards...".

Participant 4 (Management – Customer Services Terminal 4): "...so far it has worked but still needs development...most things we do add value and improve the experience for passengers...".

Participant 5 (Management – Corporate Communications): "...I learnt that the best way is to research beforehand what people would use and what they wanted...".

Participant 12 (Non-management – Information Systems): "...I don’t think any one idea can be attributed to any one person individually...".
It was clear from non-management participants that generally they were disillusioned with their managers in this competency. Participant 18 below is included to give an example of such a response.

| Participant 18 (Non-management – Database Systems): “...I haven’t known that to happen too often in BA and you certainly aren’t encouraged to try out new ideas...the ideas are dismissed by managers...”. |

7.1.3.3 Creativity

McGill et al (1992) and Ulrich et al (1993) suggested that Creativity was an indirect indicator of the willingness to take commercial risks. Iles (1997) argued that Creativity was linked to Experimentation of Ideas and innovation and was an indicator of competitiveness.

The subject of Creativity was introduced in order to explore whether the use of original, imaginative and constructive ideas to solve problems and improve processes was occurring in British Airways. Participants defined Creativity as the ability to come up with new ideas and they suggested a link with Experimentation of New Ideas. Examples of responses are given in Participants 1, 5 and 15 below.
Participant 1 (Management – People): “...I put together the assessment process for flight crew... it was very new and different for our organisation...”.

Participant 5 (Management – Corporate Communications): “...coming up with the idea to get your idea across... to come up with solutions...”.

Participant 15 (Non-management – Sales – Product Distribution): “...we had a complex business issue to go through. We found that putting them on paper in a drawing or diagram makes it visual and easier to understand... it explained things very quickly...”.

Participants also said that Creativity was characterised by the adoption of an active or generative approach to resolving problems and required greater organisational inquiry, consistent with Generative Organisational Learning proposed by Senge (1990) and Double-loop Organisational Learning suggested by Argyris & Schön (1978; 1996). Participant views related to the OLF ‘Knowing the Underlying Cause of Problems’ which follows the principle of double-loop Organisational Learning in order to improve or engage in organisational change. Participant views on Creativity were also in accordance with participant perceptions of Organisational Learning and Learning Organisations (discussed below in section 7.1.5). In terms of pro-active problem solving, and based of participant comments, it is suggested that Creativity was linked the Experimentation of Ideas. Participants in this study valued and viewed Creativity as important to the organisation’s wellbeing.

7.1.3.4 Competitor Awareness

Participant responses to questions on Competitor Awareness suggested that it was seen as important to learn from other companies in order to maintain competitive advantage and it was essential to British Airways. Participant responses supported the literature in its claim that the OLF establishes whether inter-
company learning was also taking place as proposed by Iles (1997) and McGill et al (1992), together with boundary spanning, defined by Ulrich et al (1993; p. 63) as characteristic of companies that generate “ideas by governing outside their boundaries and learning what other [competitors] do”. Participants maintained that Competitor Awareness involved learning collectively and that every employee should be engaged in it, suggesting that Learning from Others (discussed in section 7.1.2.3 above) is not only an intra-company but also an inter-company characteristic. Participants also pointed out that Competitor Awareness is about monitoring one’s own company, comparing it to others and improving it, suggesting an awareness and recognition of a need for development, not only at the individual level (discussed above in section 7.1.2.1 and 7.1.2.2), but also at the organisational level. Examples of some participant responses are cited in Participants 4, 7, 13 and 15 below.

**Participant 4** (Management – Customer Services T4): “...I’ve used competitor information for informing decisions...”.

**Participant 7** (Management – Relationship Marketing): “...We do use knowledge of competitors...absolutely vital. You must never think you’re the best and you don’t need to refer to other companies and competitors ...It is not knowing about them but learning from them, reengineering what we’ve learnt or their knowledge and whatever and apply for our purposes...If you take for granted your position in the market and don’t learn or improve you run a serious risk of failing...”.

**Participant 13** (Non-management – Flight Operations): “...They also went to a conference on pilot recruitment, training and development to learn from them or find ways of doing things differently at BA...”.

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in chapter 2 in a specific organisation. Study Two quantitatively investigates the conceptual OL framework by developing and applying a factorial framework in order to assess the OL competency climate of British Airways. To this end, it examines occupational subgroup, departmental and regional differences, and the relationship between the OL competencies and organisational commitment.