

J G BEECH

NOTIONS OF 'SUCCESS' AND 'FAILURE'
HELD BY SENIOR UK AIR LINE EXECUTIVES AND
THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF THE CAUSES OF 'SUCCESS'

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J G BEECH

An Investigation into the Notions of 'Success' and 'Failure' held by Senior UK Airline
Executives and their Perceptions of the Causes of 'Success'

Supervisor: I Black

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the notions of 'success' and 'failure' held by senior executives in the UK and Irish airline industry. Previous studies of this industry have tended to be from a positivist perspective, focusing on financial performance at the level of 'airline' or 'airline industry'. This study takes the airline executive as the unit of analysis and is conducted from a phenomenological perspective.

A methodology using interviews, causal mapping and postal questionnaires is applied to surface the notions of 'success' and 'failure' and the perception of the causes of 'success' held by board-level airline executives. Standardised data published by the Civil Aviation Authority Economic Research Group is used to establish a range of objective measures, both financial and operational, and these objective measures are compared with the rankings of the senior executives' perceptions of the success of UK and Irish airlines.

The research establishes that senior airline executives do not see 'success' in terms of financial objective measures such as Added Value or Operating Ratio; they use profit as the primary financial measure of 'success' and frequently hold notions of 'success' that are based in other functional areas such as operations and marketing. The causes of 'success' are seen as coming from the breadth of functional areas. The influence of HRM factors becomes clearer at deeper levels of abstraction when considering 'success'. There is limited evidence of the stereotyping of perceptions when the success of specific airlines is considered, but not for airlines' success in general.

Recommendations for further research into the management of human resources within airlines are made.

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NOTATION

A/C	Aircraft
ACARS	Aircraft Communications Addressing and Reporting System
ATC	Air Traffic Control
BA	British Airways
BEA	British European Airways (formerly Jersey European Airways, and subsequently renamed FlyBE)
BMI	British Midland International
CAA	Civil Aviation Authority
HRM	Human Resources Management
IAA	Irish Aviation Authority
JEA	Jersey European Airways
PAX	Passengers
PBIT	Profit before Interest and Tax
ROI	Return on Investment

The words *success*, *successful* and *failure* are given in single quotation marks where they refer to *notions* of ‘success’ etc. held by senior airline executives in particular i.e. where they refer to data arising from this research.

The verb ‘to surface’ is used transitively, meaning ‘to bring to the surface’, a usage which has been common among UK researchers for at least ten years, and longer in the United States (see e.g. (Bowman and Johnson, 1992)).

Terms referring to measured variables appear in the text with initial capitals.

Interviewees are identified by their chronological order number, e.g. [I12] represents the twelfth person to be interviewed. The order is not reflected in the listing of interviewees given in Appendix D, which is alphabetical. Similarly, [Q18] represents the writer of the eighteenth questionnaire to be returned.

My first flight was Paris to Portsmouth in 1959. The pilot arrived late, with the stewardess. He wore a reefer jacket, blue serge trousers and Wellington boots. The stewardess wore laddered stockings and mirror sunglasses. They both went into the cockpit without a word.

When the English coast loomed up the stewardess appeared in the cabin. She was still wearing sunglasses but her lipstick was smudged. 'Southend, anyone for Southend?' she shouted. The boy in front of me put up his hand.

The ageing DC3 abruptly landed. The boy was bundled out on to the grass field and we took off again. The stewardess went back into the cockpit. As we circled Portsmouth Harbour, I reflected that there was more to this flying business than met the eye.

(Moynahan, 1978)