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1. Introduction

The role of organisational culture in determining how organisations operate, make decisions, and interact with both internal and external challenges is essential. It is usually seen as the collective values, beliefs, and norms that shape individuals' thoughts and behaviours within an organisation. The importance of culture grows in globally complex industries like aviation as organisations must manage diverse workforces, maintain and achieve operational safety levels that comply with industry standards, and respond to dynamic pressures from the environment.

The goal of this study is to determine how the corporate culture at British Airways affects its organisation, decision-making processes, and overall performance, while also looking into how this culture will help it react to outside pressures that currently exist in the airline industry. Additionally, it will assess whether it serves as a disadvantage or an opportunity regarding their success and provide recommendations for improving the performance of the organisation.

2. Company Overview

British Airways was created on April 1st, 1974, through the merging of BOAC and BEA. Since then, British Airways has grown from being a UK-based airline to being one of the world's largest global brands in aviation (Britannica, 2026). As part of IAG, British Airways is one of four operating airlines that are owned by the IAG parent company, in addition to Iberia, Aer Lingus, and Vueling (British Airways, 2024). The integration into IAG has provided British Airways with the benefit of a shared strategic planning process, as well as resource coordination and operational efficiencies across the various airline markets.

British Airways primarily flies out of Heathrow Airport, which is one of the top five busiest international airports in the world. British Airways also has a very large global route network, serving over 200 destinations in over 65 countries (Routes, 2026). The British Airways network provides both long-haul and short-haul services to Europe from North America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. British Airways employs approximately 34,000 people globally; this includes pilots, cabin crew, engineers and corporate staff (British Airways, 2026). The nature and the size of these operations mean that British Airways needs to have an established organisational structure, with effective communications and a high degree of cultural alignment.

British Airways is a top-tier airline that has built an outstanding reputation as a provider of premium service, safety, and global connectivity across its network of international destinations. The airline is part of the International Airlines Group (IAG). In 2023, IAG

generated revenues of approximately €29.4 billion because of strong growth in demand for air travel following the COVID-19 pandemic (Davies, 2024). During 2023, Heathrow Airport also saw substantial growth in passenger traffic, with the airport accommodating a record 270,869 travellers in 2025 (Heathrow, 2025).

British Airways has implemented several strategic projects over the last five years designed to improve operational modernisation and the enhancement of customer service levels. The International Airlines Group has announced an almost £7 billion investment program from 2023 to 2027, to upgrade and improve digital infrastructures, as well as modernise aircraft fleets and add to their overall customer service capability with new technologies (ADS Advance, 2024). Some examples include new and improved digital booking platforms, new and improved baggage tracking systems and new investment in more fuel-efficient aircraft, such as the Airbus A350-1000 and Boeing 787-10 (Labanauskaite, 2025).

At the same time, British Airways has continued to expand its sustainability initiatives in response to increasing levels of concern over the impact of aviation on the environment. British Airways has committed to several long-term carbon reduction initiatives that include the usage of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) and the utilisation of more fuel-efficient aircraft (British Airways Media Centre, 2024).

3. Organisational Culture Influence on Structure and Decision-Making

3.1 Organisational Structure in the Aviation Industry

The airline employs approximately 34,000 people in operational positions, including cabin crew and ground workers. British Airways' primary operational hub is Heathrow Airport, which is one of the major international airports in the world. Heathrow Airport is also very busy and handles approximately 84 million people in 2025 (Heathrow, 2026). Due to the complex nature of aviation operations, operations at British Airways must be managed in a manner that creates coordination between flight operations, engineering maintenance, ground services and customer operations.

As a result, the British Airways organisation is characterised by emphasis on formal authority lines, rules and regulations, and systematic procedures. British Airways' hierarchical structure has many of the characteristics of what Charles Handy defines as a 'role culture' where bureaucratic coordination, defined roles and responsibilities create organisational efficiency (Machado and Carvalho, 2008).

3.2 Cultural Influence on Decision-Making

Safety culture holds profound significance within aviation organisations and plays an influential role in both operational and managerial decision-making processes. At every organisational tier, safety culture promotes a culture of risk management, regulatory compliance and operational discipline. Additionally, the safety culture closely resembles the underlying cultural assumptions proposed by Schein, as he proposed that behaviour is directed by assumptions and beliefs that are deeply embedded within an organisation (Ketprapakorn and Kantabutra, 2022). As a result of this fundamental assumption, safety must always take precedence, which will directly affect employees' behaviour, training and operational procedures.

Customer service culture influences British Airways' decision-making processes. BA positions itself as a full-service premium carrier and as a result, at the lead of their decision-making will be passenger experience (Claussen and O'Higgins, 2010). There is considerable evidence that indicates BA is continuously investing to improve the passenger experience. For example, BA's parent company, International Airlines Group (IAG), recently announced an investment programme of £7 billion between 2023 and 2027 to transform BA's digital services, operational systems and overall customer experience (ADS Advance, 2024).

3.3 Critical Evaluation

British Airways' organisational culture promotes compliance with two separate but linked issues that contribute towards ensuring the company is safe and operationally reliable. At the same time, this culture also imposes certain limitations on structural components.

In theory, role cultures emphasise the key organisational principles of stability, formalisation and consistency of procedures (Machado and Carvalho, 2008). These cultures are generally successful for organisations that require high levels of reliability and control. As a result, the existence of formalised procedures and hierarchical structures for decision-making is an essential organisational safeguard.

Conversely, administrative culture theorists, such as Schein, argue that culturally entrenched beliefs may limit an organisation's ability to respond adaptively in the future, if they stifle experimentation or the ability to innovate (Xanthopoulou et al., 2022). Highly procedural organisations, such as those found in the aviation industry, often use bureaucratic decision-making procedures that are slow to change in a rapidly changing global aviation industry (Altundag and Wynn, 2024).

British Airways must also demonstrate agility and responsiveness to maintain a competitive advantage within a rapidly changing global aviation industry. For British Airways, this creates

a strategic dilemma of having a high degree of operational discipline and encouraging innovation. According to British Airways' organisational culture, high levels of reliability and service quality, combined with a heavy reliance on hierarchically controlled systems of decision making, may also limit the ability to deploy new technology and provide customers with improved digital services and operational innovations promptly (Joseph and Sengul, 2024).

4. Theoretical Analysis of Organisational Culture: Schein's Model of Organisational Culture

Schein's model of organisational culture is one of the most widely used frameworks for understanding how to analyse culture in organisations. Schein proposes that culture exists at three levels: artefacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions. Together provide a complete picture of what constitutes an organisation's culture and how it functions. The three levels also provide insight into what drives an organisation's actions and decisions (AlSaied and McLaughlin, 2024).

The artefacts level consists of all the physical and observable aspects of an organisation. At British Airways, artefacts that demonstrate the company's culture may include the airline's branding, uniforms, the prescribed and published service delivery methods of the cabin crew, and the polished appearance of the staff that interacts with customers (Aslan et al., 2025). Some visible artefacts of British Airways include the lounge facilities for their premium class customers, the airline's customer service delivery standards, and the airline's emphasis on safety and security (British Airways, 2025).

The second level of organisational culture is espoused values. These values reflect the ideal values that an organisation claims to hold and demonstrate its publicly expressed commitment to the basic values of its business (Bourne et al., 2017). For example, British Airways has publicly stated its three key corporate values are customer service excellence, operational reliability and global connectivity. The value placed on customer experience enhancement demonstrates British Airways' commitment to improving passenger experience and operational effectiveness.

The third level of organisational culture is underlying assumptions. Underlying assumptions are the beliefs that are deeply ingrained within an organisation and usually unconsciously influence the behaviour of its employees (AlSaied and McLaughlin, 2024). One of the key underlying assumptions for British Airways is the importance of operational safety and reliability. Aviation is an extremely regulated industry with a primary focus on safety, so the

belief in operational safety and reliability is a major factor in influencing how employees behave and make decisions within the organisation.

5. Cultural Adaptation to External Environment

5.1 Competitive Pressures in the Global Aviation Industry

The global airline industry has continued to become more competitive over the last decade due to a changing marketplace that has seen traditionally full-service airlines compete not only against other full-service airlines but also with low-cost carriers (Sun et al., 2024). This occurs in both the premium and the low-price segments of the market, as evidenced by the expansion of Middle Eastern airlines to leading airlines, providing world-class service to their customers as well as a modern fleet of aircraft (Boeing, 2025). The emergence of low-cost airlines out of Europe has altered the competitive structure of the airline industry, resulting in lower fares and simplified service models.

British Airways has attempted to respond to the above competitive pressures by building and maintaining a strong brand identity based on service quality, reliability, and customer access to the world. The culture of British Airways plays a vital role in supporting the strategy of brand identity, in that it establishes the value of professional service and operational efficiency for the employees of British Airways (British Airways, 2025). British Airways culture continues to reflect the importance of delivering superior customer service on premium long-haul service routes as one of the primary competitive differentiators for these service routes and will remain an essential competitive advantage for British Airways in the future (Lange et al., 2015).

5.2 Technological Transformation and Digital Innovation

Technological advancements are playing an increasing role in driving organisational transformation within the aviation sector. To achieve operational efficiencies, provide a better customer experience, and effectively manage the large volume of data related to their customers, airlines are now required to invest in digital systems. British Airways has been investing heavily in digital transformation efforts to improve both its internal operations and those related to passenger services. Examples include investing £100 million to improve operational performance, featuring 830 change projects and recruitment of over 100 data scientists (British Airways, 2025).

5.3 Environmental and Sustainability Pressures

British Airways is implementing a range of environmental sustainability initiatives, including a long-term goal of reducing carbon emissions and the purchase of new, fuel-efficient aircraft, including the Airbus A350 and the Boeing 787 Dreamliner. The airline is also participating in initiatives designed to promote the use of Sustainable Aviation Fuels (SAF), which can provide an opportunity to greatly reduce lifecycle greenhouse gas emissions when compared to traditional aviation fuels (British Airways Media Centre, 2024).

Through these environmental initiatives, British Airways' organisational culture is evolving to make environmental sustainability a key component of its overall strategic focus. The company's willingness to invest in cleaner technologies and improve operational practices suggests that cultural values associated with corporate social responsibility and long-term environmental sustainability are affecting the airline's strategic decision-making processes.

6. Barriers and Enablers to Organisational Culture

6.1 Organisational Culture as an Enabler

British Airways' strong focus on safety, competence, and quality of service is a defining characteristic of its organisational culture. Safety is a foremost concern in the aviation industry because of the critical nature of operational reliability and passenger confidence for a successful long-term future. British Airways operates within a culture of safety that promotes compliance with established operational procedures and regulatory authorities, thereby contributing to a high level of safety across operational areas like flight operations, engineering, and ground services (AL23 Safety, 2025).

The second facilitating factor for British Airways is the company's long tradition of being recognised as a premium service provider. Historically, British Airways has positioned itself as a full-service airline, with an emphasis on providing a high-quality travel experience—most notably on international long-haul routes. This customer service-oriented culture encourages employees to focus on the satisfaction of passengers and provides consistency of service throughout their international network. Cultural consistency helps to reinforce the airline's global brand identity and adds value to customer loyalty.

6.2 Organisational Culture as a Barrier

Airlines tend to have very structured and hierarchical organisational cultures. This is common within the aviation industry, which could delay decision-making. Over-reliance on

formal mechanisms and organizational systems can also contribute to reduced agility within an organisation.

British Airways may find it difficult to create structure of cultural values across its various operational units and global workforce. There are thousands of employees in the company located in different countries from one another, as well as performing diverse functions within each operational unit (Yasar and Gerede, 2025). Effective internal communication and leadership are required to ensure that all employees share similar organisational values.

Airlines must be innovative in their businesses, whether it is through the sustainability of operations or improvements to the customer experience. If an airline's organisational culture focuses primarily on traditional operational processes, it will be difficult for that airline to adapt quickly to the technological and market changes that inevitably arise.

7. Recommendations

The airline places a heavy emphasis on professionalism, safety and service as part of its ongoing cultural commitment. It has developed a reputation for reliability in operations and has a strong brand. This reputation and the strong cultural values that focus it facilitate trust among passengers and strengthen the airline's position in the international aviation market. British Airways is also benefiting from being part of an international airline group (IAG), which has enabled the company to implement operational efficiency and financial performance benefits through coordinated strategic initiatives. For example, IAG's revenues in 2023 were approximately €29.4 billion, with a strong recovery from the previous year in terms of global demand for air travel (Beresnevičius, 2024).

As a priority, British Airways should continue to build an innovation-focused environment in which employees are actively involved in helping to drive digital transformation initiatives and improving operations.

Second, the airline should seek to increase the use of data-driven management systems for more informed and timely decision-making throughout all its operational functions.

Third, organisationally, the airline's leadership development programmes should be focused on developing skills in cross-cultural management to be better able to work collaboratively with international teams that are becoming increasingly diverse.

Finally, British Airways should continue to invest in sustainable initiatives and environmentally friendly practices to ensure that its culture remains aligned with the

increasing global trend of holding corporations accountable for their actions as responsible environmental stewards.

8. Conclusion

The report gives a critical examination of the impact that an Organisational Culture has on the structure and the decision-making processes of British Airways and its performance. Organisational Culture is a significant part of shaping operational practices within British Airways, being primarily determined by its degree of emphasis on safety, high levels of professionalism and service quality. The British Airways culture has been established as facilitating reliability and stability. However, because of this type of culture, British Airways could find difficulties in achieving flexible and innovative responses. So, improving and developing innovations, digital capabilities and cross-cultural leadership will be fundamental to establishing British Airways long-term competitiveness.

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