



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
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Trinity Saint David

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Student Name: Valentyna Staskus

Student Number: 3423885

Lecturer Name: Toyin Adisa

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1 Abstract

This report aims to examine the organisational culture of the John Lewis Partnership (JLP) and assess how it influences structure, decision-making, adaptability, and overall performance. The study uses analytical secondary research supported by academic theories, reliable literature, company sources, and insights from personal experience working at the organisation. Cultural frameworks, including Schein's model, Handy's typology and the Competing Values Framework, are applied to identify dominant cultural characteristics and evaluate their strategic outcomes. The findings highlight that JLP's partnership culture delivers strong engagement and ethical value but may constrain agility, innovation, and rapid strategic action in a competitive retail environment.

2 Introduction

Culture can be described as the shared system of values, meanings, norms, and practices that shape how groups of people understand the world and interact with one another (Hofstede et al., 2010; Spencer-Oatey, 2012). It influences expectations, communication, behaviour, and identity, and plays a central role in shaping collective human activity.

Within organisations, culture refers to the shared beliefs, assumptions, and behavioural expectations that guide how work is carried out and how members respond to internal and external challenges (Schein, 2010; Hogan and Côté, 2014). Organisational culture is often viewed as "how things are done" in a workplace and is recognised as an important factor influencing employee attitudes, innovation, decision-making, and overall organisational performance (Chatman and O'Reilly, 2016; Bagga et al., 2023). Recent research highlights

culture as a socially constructed and multi-layered phenomenon shaped by leadership, communication, structures, and everyday practices (Tadesse Bogale, 2024). In this report, organisational culture is defined as the shared meanings, values, and behaviours that distinguish one organisation from another and guide how employees understand and respond to their environment.

John Lewis Partnership (JLP) provides a useful case study for examining organisational culture in practice. JLP, which includes John Lewis department stores and Waitrose supermarkets, operates a long-established employee-ownership model. All employees are considered partners in the business and participate in governance processes designed to support transparency, shared responsibility, and mutual benefit (Storey and Salaman, 2017; Wren, 2020). This introduction provides the basis for analysing how JLP's partnership culture has developed, how it influences organisational structure and decision-making, and whether it contributes to improved organisational performance or creates barriers to effectiveness.

3 How Organisational Culture Shapes Structure and Decision-Making at John Lewis Partnership

The organisational culture at John Lewis Partnership (JLP) is characterised by shared ownership, democratic governance, and partner empowerment, all of which directly influence its organisational structure and approach to decision-making. Because all employees are designated as "partners," the culture promotes participation, representation, and accountability across the organisation (Storey and Salaman, 2017). As a result, the structure is comparatively less hierarchical and more participative than that found in many conventional retail organisations.

JLP's constitution formalises this cultural approach. Partner-elected representatives hold positions on key governance bodies, including the Partnership Board and the Partnership Council, enabling employees to contribute to strategic and operational decision-making (Storey and Salaman, 2017). These structural arrangements reflect core cultural values such as shared knowledge, collective responsibility, and mutual reward. The model assumes that giving employees greater autonomy will lead to improved customer service and support sustainable organisational success.

Decision-making within JLP is shaped by the same cultural principles. The partnership model emphasises consultation, transparency, and a long-term perspective rather than short-term, rapid decision-making. Research suggests that while this approach strengthens partner engagement and organisational commitment, it can also introduce complexity. Woodward (2024) highlights that JLP's democratic processes, developed over many decades, create multiple layers of consultation and "citizen-participant" roles, which may slow decision-making in a fast-changing retail environment.

Overall, organisational culture, structure, and decision-making within JLP operate as interconnected elements rather than separate functions. The culture requires structural mechanisms that support partner participation and decision processes that prioritise inclusion and shared ownership. This alignment forms the foundation of the JLP business model, generating significant strengths in engagement and accountability, while also presenting challenges in terms of responsiveness and efficiency.

4 Types of Organisational Culture

4.1 Overview of Theoretical Models

There are many ways of categorising organisational culture, but for the purposes of analysing John Lewis Partnership (JLP) it is useful to draw on three well-established frameworks that capture structural, behavioural, and strategic cultural characteristics. Organisational culture research frequently uses typologies and analytical models to diagnose cultural features and understand their implications. One of the most established diagnostic tools is the Cultural Web developed by Johnson and Scholes (1992), which identifies six interrelated elements—stories, rituals and routines, symbols, organisational structure, control systems and power structures—that collectively form the organisational paradigm, or the set of underlying assumptions shaping organisational behaviour. Handy (1993) presents another influential typology, distinguishing four dominant cultural types—power, role, task, and person—each of which reflects different approaches to authority, work design and decision-making. In addition, Deal and Kennedy (1982/2000) propose a classification based on levels of risk and speed of feedback, identifying four cultural forms: work-hard/play-hard, tough-guy/macho, process, and bet-your-company.

Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive basis for examining the cultural characteristics of JLP and provide analytical tools for identifying dominant cultural patterns, structural influences, and behavioural expectations. The following section applies the Cultural Web specifically to JLP to demonstrate how partnership principles are integrated within everyday organisational practice and governance arrangements.

4.2 Applying the Cultural Web to John Lewis Partnership

The Cultural Web provides a systematic framework for exploring how deep-seated organisational values are woven into structures, behaviours, and communication (Johnson and Scholes, 1992; Personio, 2024). Within JLP, organisation-wide narratives frequently refer to the legacy of John Spedan Lewis and his philosophy of industrial democracy, reinforcing values of co-ownership and mutual benefit (Storey and Salaman, 2017). Rituals and routines, including partner meetings, democratic voting procedures, the annual bonus scheme and regular internal communication channels, further consolidate expectations of participation and inclusivity (Storey and Salaman, 2017). Cultural symbols, such as the term “Partner,” the formal Partnership Constitution and brand messaging focused on fairness and quality, contribute to a shared identity and sense of purpose (John Lewis Partnership, 2025).

The structure of JLP reflects these cultural principles through partner-representative governance bodies such as the Partnership Council and Partnership Board. This produces a relatively flat and participative hierarchy compared with many retail organisations (Storey and Salaman, 2017). Control systems, including performance monitoring and financial reporting, prioritise transparency, shared profit, and accountability to partners rather than external shareholders. Power is deliberately diffused through elected representation, supporting wider participation in decision-making processes. Combined, these elements illustrate JLP’s cultural paradigm: a partnership model centred on participation, fairness, quality, and long-term sustainability (Storey and Salaman, 2017).

4.3 Supplementary Cultural Analysis

Handy’s and Deal and Kennedy’s typologies provide additional insight into JLP’s cultural characteristics. According to Handy (1993), JLP displays features of both role culture and

task culture. Role culture can be seen in formal governance structures, clear reporting lines and detailed procedures. At the same time, task culture is visible in cross-functional collaboration, particularly in areas such as customer experience management, digital transformation and innovation. Power culture is intentionally limited, as authority is distributed, and person culture is less pronounced because partnership values emphasise collective involvement over individual autonomy.

Deal and Kennedy's (2000) framework suggests that JLP most closely aligns with a process culture, where risk is low, and procedures provide stability and predictability. Governance mechanisms, internal consultation systems and measured strategic change all reflect this process orientation. JLP therefore differs from the work-hard/play-hard, tough-guy/macho and bet-your-company cultural types, as it does not prioritise rapid feedback, high-risk decision-making, or competitive performance behaviour.

4.4 Discussion and Implications

Using multiple cultural frameworks demonstrates that JLP's organisational culture is multi-layered, historically developed and institutionally embedded. The Cultural Web highlights how partnership principles infuse everyday practices, while Handy's and Deal and Kennedy's models underline the balance between structured governance, collaborative teamwork, and procedural stability. This cultural configuration provides distinct strengths, including high employee engagement, clear organisational identity, and customer trust. However, there are potential limitations, particularly in contexts that require rapid decision-making and organisational adaptability. Focus on consultation, process and democratic representation may slow strategic responsiveness in a highly competitive retail environment.

5 Organisational Culture and External Environment

Understanding how organisational culture relates to external influences is essential for analysing strategic and operational responses. External factors such as political, economic, social, and technological developments directly affect internal priorities and decision-making. It is important to assess whether cultural values support or restrict responses to these external pressures, as this helps identify risks, opportunities and areas needing change. The PESTLE framework (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal and Environmental factors) provides a structured way to examine these influences (Johnson, Whittington and Scholes, 2020). For the John Lewis Partnership (JLP), culture functions as both a guiding force and an adaptive mechanism in responding to a competitive retail environment.

5.1 Political Factors

Political forces, particularly national economic policy, minimum wage legislation and employment regulation, shape the environment in which JLP operates. The organisation's culture of fairness, trust and responsible employment supports compliance with UK employment standards, equality legislation and corporate governance requirements (Storey and Salaman, 2017). Because JLP positions itself as an ethical employer, cultural values encourage proactive responses to political expectations surrounding worker welfare and corporate responsibility. This alignment between cultural identity and political requirements contributes to reputational strength and supports stakeholder confidence.

5.2 Economic Factors

Instability in the economy, higher operational expenses and shifts in consumer purchasing behaviour pose major challenges for retailers in the UK. JLP's partnership structure and long-term cultural orientation—rather than a traditional shareholder-driven model—supports more sustainable responses to economic uncertainty. Historically, JLP has prioritised employment security and partner engagement during downturns, using its collective ownership model to support organisational resilience (Woodward, 2024). Cultural values emphasising fairness and shared reward encourage a balanced approach to cost management that maintains partner motivation and service quality even during periods of reduced consumer demand.

5.3 Social Factors

Public demand for ethical products, inclusion, openness, and excellent customer service is continually changing. JLP's organisational culture aligns closely with these developments. The emphasis on fairness, integrity and partner empowerment reinforces customer trust and supports the organisation's desired image as a socially responsible retailer (Chatman and O'Reilly, 2016). This cultural alignment enables JLP to engage positively with wider social trends, including inclusive employment practices, community investment and sustainability-focused sourcing, without creating tensions between internal values and external expectations.

5.4 Technological Factors

Technological change, including the growth of e-commerce, digital retail platforms and automation, requires rapid adaptation across the retail industry. While JLP has at times been criticised for a slower technological response (Woodward, 2024), aspects of its culture support innovation and cross-functional collaboration. Task-focused elements of the culture (Handy, 1993) support collaboration and information exchange in digital change initiatives.

Although decision-making can be delayed by consultation and governance procedures, cultural values that emphasise trust, openness and ongoing improvement help lower resistance to new technology and encourage long-term digital progress.

5.5 Legal Factors

JLP operates under strict legal requirements relating to employment practices, consumer rights, data privacy and corporate governance. The Partnership's democratic regulation structures—such as elected partner councils and transparent reporting systems—improve conformity to regulations by integrating responsibility into organisational procedures (Storey and Salaman, 2017). Cultural emphasis on honesty, responsibility and communication reduces the likelihood of legal risk and strengthens organisational capability to respond to new regulatory demands.

5.6 Environmental Factors

Environmental sustainability, climate-related regulation and ethical sourcing expectations increasingly shape strategic priorities in UK retailing. JLP's culture of fairness and long-term thinking supports proactive environmental initiatives. Cultural values promoting transparency and accountability encourage sustainable supply-chain practices, responsible product development and environmental reporting. Ethical identity, embedded through partner involvement and governance mechanisms, strengthens the organisation's ability to meet rising customer expectations around environmental performance.

5.7 Summary: Culture as an External Adaptation Mechanism

Overall, JLP's organisational culture functions as a strategic resource for interpreting and responding to external pressures. Cultural values centred on partnership, democratic governance and long-term responsibility provide resilience in relation to political and economic forces, while values-based orientation aligns well with social and environmental expectations. However, the same cultural features may slow strategic responsiveness to technological disruption and fast-moving competitive threats, illustrating culture's dual role as both an enabler and a constraint (Woodward, 2024; Deal and Kennedy, 2000). Understanding this interaction between culture and the external environment is crucial for assessing JLP's strategic capacity and future organisational sustainability.

6 Organisational Culture and Barrier to Effective Function

Although the John Lewis Partnership (JLP) is widely recognised for its strong employee-ownership culture and democratic governance model, this same culture can also present barriers to effective functioning. Organisational culture is not inherently positive; depending on context and environmental pressures, it can both enable and constrain organisational performance (Schein, 2010; Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016). In the case of JLP, several cultural characteristics may limit efficiency, adaptability, and strategic responsiveness.

A prominent barrier arises from the organisation's deeply embedded participative governance system. Decision-making in JLP involves consultation with partners through representative bodies such as the Partnership Council and various forums, which can slow organisational responsiveness (Storey & Salaman, 2017). While wide participation supports inclusivity and trust, it can hinder rapid decision-making in a competitive retail sector characterised by fast technological change and economic volatility. Woodward (2024)

argues that JLP's democratic processes, originally designed for stability and employee engagement, may create structural rigidity that challenges the organisation's ability to respond swiftly to market pressures.

The culture's emphasis on fairness, consensus-building, and long-term orientation can also limit managerial discretion. Senior leaders may find it difficult to implement necessary but unpopular decisions—such as restructuring, automation, or store closures—because partner opposition is institutionally strong (Storey & Salaman, 2017). This is consistent with the wider literature suggesting that strong clan-based cultures may resist change when core values conflict with strategic necessity (Deal & Kennedy, 2000; Handy, 1993).

In addition, aspects of JLP's culture correspond with what Deal and Kennedy (2000) describe as a “process culture,” which prioritises consistency, structured planning and following established rules. Although this type of culture supports dependability, it can also lead to excessive bureaucracy, slower innovation, and cautious decision-making. In a fast-moving retail sector driven by digital change and shifting consumer expectations, these cultural characteristics may limit the organisation's flexibility and ability to adapt quickly.

At times, the partnership model has been criticised for contributing to internal conservatism. The strong identity of partners as co-owners fosters pride and loyalty but may also reduce receptiveness to external ideas or disruptive practices (Woodward, 2024). This cultural attachment to tradition—reinforced through stories and symbols within the Cultural Web—can make large-scale transformation slower and more contested.

Overall, while JLP's organisational culture is a unique strength, it simultaneously acts as a barrier in situations requiring rapid decision-making, strategic restructuring, and

organisational flexibility. The case of JLP illustrates that even positive, values-driven cultures must evolve to avoid becoming misaligned with external pressures and industry demands.

7 Organisational Culture and Organisational Performance

Organisational culture is widely recognised as a significant determinant of organisational performance, shaping employee behaviour, customer experience, innovation, and long-term sustainability (Hogan and Coote, 2014; Chatman and O'Reilly, 2016). In the context of the John Lewis Partnership (JLP), its employee-owned partnership culture plays a central role in driving both operational outcomes and strategic performance.

JLP's culture promotes high levels of employee involvement, shared ownership, and democratic participation. Research consistently shows that cultures characterised by high engagement and strong organisational commitment tend to produce superior service quality and improved customer satisfaction (Zhang et al., 2023). In JLP's case, the partnership model reinforces intrinsic motivation, as partners are not only employees but co-owners who share in profits and governance (Storey and Salaman, 2017). This sense of ownership enhances performance behaviours such as discretionary effort, customer care and operational responsibility, all of which contribute to reputational strength and service excellence.

The culture also supports long-term strategic performance. Because JLP is not driven by external shareholders, it may prioritise sustainable decision-making and reinvestment over short-term returns, which aligns with findings that long-term orientation improves organisational resilience and adaptability (Bagga et al., 2023). The cultural paradigm—emphasising fairness, quality, integrity, and partner wellbeing—supports a stable internal

environment, enabling consistent service delivery and contributing to long-term brand loyalty.

However, the impact of culture on performance is not uniformly positive. While strong cultures can enhance coordination and engagement, they may also create rigidity (Schein, 2010). In JLP, the democratic and highly consultative decision-making processes can slow organisational responsiveness, especially in competitive retail markets requiring quick adaptation. Woodward (2024) notes that the Partnership's governance model introduces structural layers—such as councils, forums, and elected bodies—which can delay strategic changes. This can hinder performance in areas requiring speed, innovation, or cost efficiency.

Moreover, process-oriented cultures, such as that evident in JLP through formal governance, routines, and procedures, can reduce risk-taking and limit the pace of digital transformation, an important performance driver in modern retail environments (Deal and Kennedy, 2000). The challenge, therefore, lies in balancing cultural strengths—engagement, service quality, fairness—with operational agility.

Overall, JLP's organisational culture strongly influences its performance. It increases employee commitment, supports high service standards, and provides long-term strategic consistency, reflecting research showing that well-defined, values-driven cultures lead to improved organisational results (Hogan and Coote, 2014).

Yet it may also constrain rapid change and innovation. JLP's culture has two sides: it can boost performance, but in competitive situations, it can also hold the company back. To stay

successful, JLP needs to protect its core values while becoming more flexible and quicker to respond in a fast-moving retail market.

8 Recommendations

Based on the analysis of how organisational culture shapes performance within the John Lewis Partnership (JLP), several actions may support the organisation in maintaining cultural strengths while addressing constraints that limit responsiveness. Strengthening flexible decision-making processes is a key priority. Although JLP's democratic and consultative culture supports high engagement and shared ownership, it can slow decisions when rapid action is required. A tiered governance model allowing smaller leadership groups to resolve routine or time-sensitive issues, while maintaining transparency through structured partner communication, would help reduce delays. A clear definition of decision areas where faster authorisation is permitted, particularly regarding pricing, digital initiatives, and customer experience, may preserve participatory values while enhancing responsiveness.

Integrating cultural values with digital transformation is also essential. JLP's collaborative mindset provides a strong foundation for innovation, yet attachment to established routines may impede change. Incorporating partnership principles into digital strategy and involving partners earlier in transformation projects, supported by targeted digital skills development, could reduce resistance and encourage shared ownership (Woodward, 2024).

Enhancing organisational learning through cross-functional collaboration and protected innovation spaces would further promote responsiveness to change while remaining aligned with partnership values (Storey and Salaman, 2017).

Refreshing cultural rituals and organisational storytelling linked to priorities in digital growth, customer service and social responsibility may strengthen commitment, identity, and strategic renewal.

9 Conclusion

The analysis shows that organisational culture is a powerful force shaping structure, behaviour, and performance in organisations. The John Lewis Partnership (JLP) demonstrates how shared values, ownership models and collective norms influence motivation, governance, and strategic outcomes. JLP's partnership ethos, built on fairness, mutual responsibility, and democratic involvement, supports employee commitment, service quality and a strong ethical identity. However, the case also highlights that a consultative, process-based culture may restrict agility, innovation, and fast decision-making in competitive and rapidly changing markets. Sustainable organisational success requires a balance between cultural continuity and adaptive change. Protecting core values while streamlining decision systems and encouraging innovation allows culture to remain a strategic asset rather than a constraint, supporting resilience and long-term performance. As Chatman and O'Reilly (2016) note, organisations with strong, values-based cultures perform best when they can evolve in response to environmental pressures rather than remain fixed in past assumptions.

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