

Assignment 1

by Emma Jones

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An investigation into AirAsia's digital transformation journey

Emma Medi Jones

In order to gain competitive advantage in such a rapidly changing world, organisations are required to be more resilient and innovative than ever. Adapting to the ever-changing business landscape requires a company to change, which is becoming a constant feature of organisational life. The way in which an organisation can manage change is considered a major attribute to whether it will succeed or fail in its industry.

The process of managing change requires a company to identify its key resources and capabilities to develop strategies to meet the needs of the external environment. Kaplan and Norton (2004) state 'changes in strategy require basic changes in the way business is conducted at all levels of the organisation, which means, of course, that people will need to develop new attitudes and behaviours – in other words, change their culture'. A company's culture can either catalyse or get in the way of change efforts and is considered a key force for the success or failure of change.

This journal article will investigate AirAsia's approach to change, specifically focusing on its vision to be a digital company. A change management framework – Kotter's eight-step model is used to determine the key change management principles when dealing with change. The research undertaken is compiled and is used to reach analytical discussion upon the appropriateness of AirAsia's approach to change in the context of organisational culture.

Due to the specific change management framework used for this study it is logical to begin by discussing the deployed research methodology. The data consists of both primary and secondary research which is used to provide a deeper understanding of the topic.

Secondary data comprises a combination of traditional and alternative materials. Traditional literature includes digital and physical resources provided by the University. These resources encompass academic journals from Business Source Complete, industry and company information from Marketline and academic change management books.

For alternative materials, google and other search engines are used in order to find relevant websites, documents and news articles. These may not be academic sources but do provide relevant information regarding AirAsia and the aviation industry. Secondary data has been used to develop the main themes associated with change managements which is focused around organisational culture and people.

Primary data is gathered through a qualitative research method which is used to provide a richer insight into human perception and experience which is not directly expressed through literature. A qualitative research approach allows the researcher to explore phenomena which includes thoughts and feelings (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and is especially useful for finding the meaning that people give to events they experience (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

The qualitative study is conducted through a presentation style interview with Jordan Kho – Special Project Senior Executive at AirAsia's corporate headquarters on the 21st January 2020. Topics discussed include AirAsia's history, culture, strategy and processes. This method of collecting data falls into a case study methodology which Stake (1995) describes as a strategy of inquiry used to explore an activity, event, process, program or individual/s in much depth. Only a small number of individuals should be selected as part of a case study methodology (Zainal, 2007).

This form of collecting data is concerned with Ontology. This is a research style that focuses on the nature of existence or being rather than looking through a theoretical lens (Saunders and Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). Jordan's presentation provides a deeper insight into experiences, which is important for this type of study as it is concerned with organisational culture and the management of people.

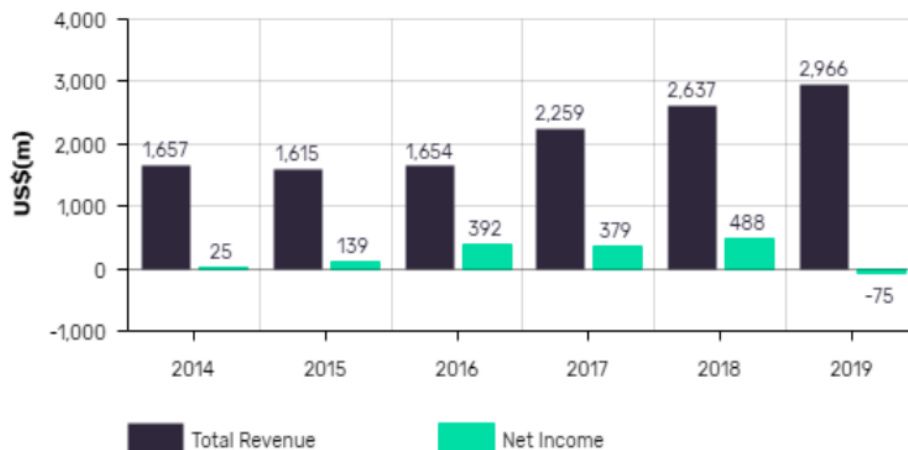
A combination of secondary and primary data provides a better understanding of the topic however, there are still limitations to the study. Only Jordan was interviewed, therefore the data gathered may not be accurate as the experiences of other staff

members may differ, also by developing themes from the secondary data, the interpretation of the participant's answer may not be correct.

AirAsia is a provider of low-cost ¹⁴ airline services which include passenger and cargo transportation across domestic and international markets. AirAsia is Headquartered in Sepang in Malaysia and operates through a number of hubs in Asia.

In recent years the company has diversified its portfolio of products and services by providing car rental services and arrange concerts, sporting events, musicals and theatre performances under the banner of AirAsia Red Tix (Marketline, 2020). The company has won 15 awards since 2012, the most recent being the best low-cost carrier at the World Travel Awards Asia in October 2019. Key financial information is shown below:

Figure 1: AirAsia's total revenue and net income information 2014-2019



¹⁵

(Source: Marketline, 2020)

Despite a loss in net income, AirAsia view the results as positive and reported an airline revenue increase ¹⁶ % compared with the previous year while digital non-airline initiatives report significant revenue growth year on year (AirAsia, 2020). Airline consumers are given more choice than ever therefore, AirAsia focuses on digital growth ¹⁷ to combat external pressure and to gain competitive advantage (Marketline, 2019).

A shift in macro-economics is inevitably having an impact on every sector and industry, which is driving organisations to change their strategies and processes. Macro-economic factors are uncontrollable and play an important role in an organisation's everyday life (Morrison, 2011). Changes in the external environment include technological advancement, aggressive competition and volatile economic conditions which all have an impact on consumer behaviour and perceptions (Singh, 2014).  18

Failing to adapt to trends in the external environment can be detrimental for organisations. Companies that will gain competitive advantage are those that are willing to change and are able to turn challenges into opportunities, while failing companies are those that don't  19 change and are unable to adapt to meet external  20 demands. Thomas Cook for example, once a leader in its industry, failed because it was trying to make an analogue model work in a digital age (Hayhurst, 2019).  21

Change can cause positive or negative results for an organisation which is dependent on the implementation and management of change (Burnes, 2004). Moran and Brightman (2001:111) defines changed management as 'the process of continually renewing and organisation's direction, structure and capabilities to serve the ever-changing needs of the customer'. There is no 'quick fix' solution, therefore the process of change can be extremely complex.  22

Change comes in many shapes and sizes which may be small or large-scale change. Whatever the level of organisational change, people are always on the receiving end and it is these human beings who will ultimately cause the change to be a success or a failure (Cameron and Green, 2015). This suggests that in order for people to change their way of working, an organisation's culture  23 also change.

Rousseau and McLean (1993) defines culture as 'the collection of traditions, values, policies, beliefs and attitudes that constitute a pervasive context for everything we do and think in an organisation'. From how the office is laid out to what staff wear, from how meetings are carried out and how decisions are made – culture is what drives behaviour within an organisation. As defined by Druker (1995), culture is 'the way things are done around here.' An organisation's culture can therefore, either drive or get in the way of change efforts.  25

Deal and Kennedy (2000) identifies four key cultures, but believe no culture type can be considered better than another because the types emerge as a result of circumstances and suitability. Culture must be fit for purpose – in other words it needs to be strategically relevant and robust enough for people to care. 26

Heskett and Kotter (1992) found a positive correlation between organisational culture and performance. According to Higgs (2006) up to 60 percent of business performance can be attributed to culture and up to 80 percent of culture can be attributed to leadership behaviour. Culture may therefore, be seen as a barrier to change, however when functional during a change project, culture is considered a driving force and may be a real source of competitive advantage. 27

A useful model used to implement and manage change is Kotter's (1995) 'eight steps to transforming your organisation' model which derives from analysis of his consulting practice with 100 different organisations going through change. The research conducted highlighted eight key lessons which was later transformed into an eight step model for leaders wanting to make changes within their organisations. 28

The model addresses some of the power issues associated with making change happen, establishes the importance of 'felt need' change, and expresses the need to communicate the vision several times throughout the process. All eight steps of the model are demonstrated in the figure below:

Figure 3: Kotter's eight step change model



(Source: Kotter, 1995)

Establishing a sense of urgency

Kotter believes that for change to be successful, 75 percent of the team needs to buy into the idea, which means leaders have to spend a considerable amount of time and energy building urgency, before moving onto the next stage. Schein (1999) suggests that organisations will not successfully change culture if they begin with that  30 instead the starting point should always be the business issues that the organisation faces.

In an age of digital transformation, organisations are required to jump on the technology  31 wagon to keep up with competitive forces and customer demands. This belief is reinforced by AirAsia's Chief executive officer (CEO) Tony Fernandes who states, 'you either be a dinosaur manager or a digital manager, it's either you change or be changed!' (Franko, 2020). For AirAsia this sparked the initial motivation to get things moving in a digital age.  32

Create a guiding coalition

Not having key people onboard to drive a change project can cause resistance which, if not carefully managed, can quickly spiral into chaos and failure (Lewin, 1951). Strong leadership and support from key managers is required to convince people change is necessary.

The first basic ingredient of leadership is a guiding vision – the leader has a clear idea of what needs to be done (Bennis, 1994). AirAsia were one of the first companies to embrace e-commerce in a big way and fostered a culture of booking tickets via the web  33. AirAsia's deputy group CEO Aireen Omar said that was key as it set the tone for everything they have done since and what they are doing today (Sivalingam, 2018). This suggests AirAsia gained support from key managers from the beginning which allowed the company to successfully launch its digital plans.  34

Heifetz and Laurie (1997) state vision is not the answer and that the senior executive needs to alter his/her approach to match the needs of the of the 21st century organisation. AirAsia's senior executives have embraced this idea and focus on building their digital business via internal digital channels, which includes a workplace Facebook for all members of staff to communicate through  35. The team also implemented new systems which was easily digestible. This included training and

learning through digital games and experiences so that key managers and staff didn't fear the change (Syed, 2019).  36

Develop a vision

A clear vision can help everyone understand what the business is ultimately trying to achieve and their purpose within an organisation.  37 AirAsia's long-term vision is to be a digital company in the aviation industry. The desire to be digital-first took flight in 2002 when CEO Tony Fernandes realised distribution channels had to be optimised if the airline was to make flying easier for the masses (Sivalingam, 2018).  38

Communicate the vision

It is important that the vision is communicated frequently and powerfully and embedded in everything that the organisation does. AirAsia's ultimate objective is to be a travel technology company which appeals to today's technology savvy customer, but AirAsia also puts employee experience centre stage by mirroring what customers experience.  39

As mentioned, AirAsia has already implemented digital communication and training systems which is used to reinforce their vision of being digital-first. The company has installed a new cloud-based human capital management system which provides a digitally efficient system for all members of the team. Additionally, to show that they are serious about their vision, staff are greeted with high-tech gates which uses facial recognition software to make movement in and out of the office seamless and digital.  40

Empower broad-based actions 41

Reaching this step means that people from all levels of the organisation is buying in to the vision and a new culture is developing. At this stage AirAsia need to be able to recognise people for making change happen who are ultimately responsible for supporting and motivating other members.  42 When accepted by employees, culture increases the authority of managers as employees internalise the organisation's values and they are motivated to achieve organisational objectives (Cartwright 1999).

AirAsia have implemented this stage by identifying change champions within the organisation ensuring that their main role is to deliver the change. This is achieved by moving change champions from one  department to another no matter what their role might be. For example, AirAsia's digital ambassador – Allan Phang has worked in many areas across the organisation including marketing, the people and culture department and has been involved in many of AirAsia's digital projects (Franko, 2020). His views and passion, along with many others, have helped AirAsia achieve its digital plans.

Generate short-term wins

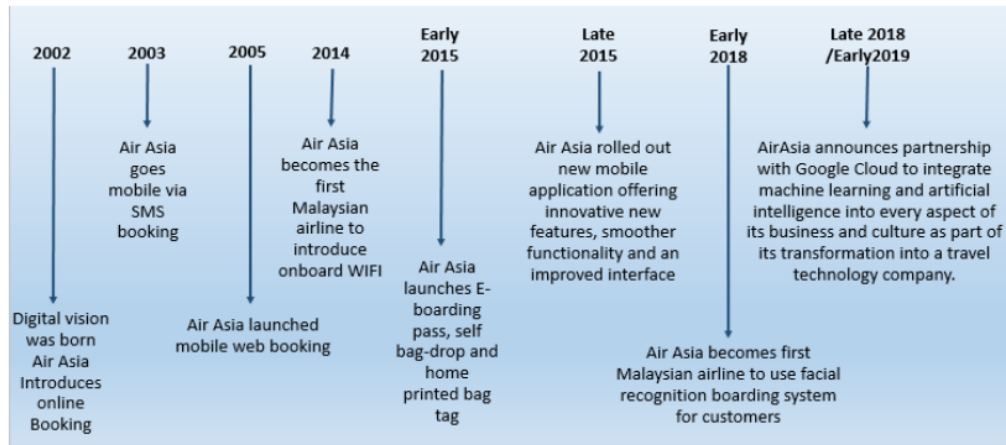
It is important that colleagues feel motivated, even more so when an organisation is going through change. A way in which an organisation can motivate staff is through reward. Armstrong (2014) states that reward management involves both financial and non-financial elements and that the overall aim  reward people fairly, equitably and consistently in accordance with their value to the organisation.

Kotter  yes motivation comes from success, but success also requires hard work and therefore colleagues should be rewarded for their achievements. AirAsia generates short term wins for employees by awarding bonuses based on productivity and increases loyalty through its employee share ownership scheme ESOS. Non – financial awards such as free flights, and opportunities to progress are also used within AirAsia to generate short-term wins and motivate colleagues. 

Never let up

Herrero (2008) sees that real change occurs in organisations through a number of key principles with the central idea being behaviour change which will in turn lead to cultural change. Setting goals, implementing new ideas and continuing to build momentum is essential. To achieve its overall vision, AirAsia has successfully launched innovative digital services to its customers with the support of its staff which is demonstrated in the figure below:

Figure 4: AirAsia's major digital milestone timeline since 2002



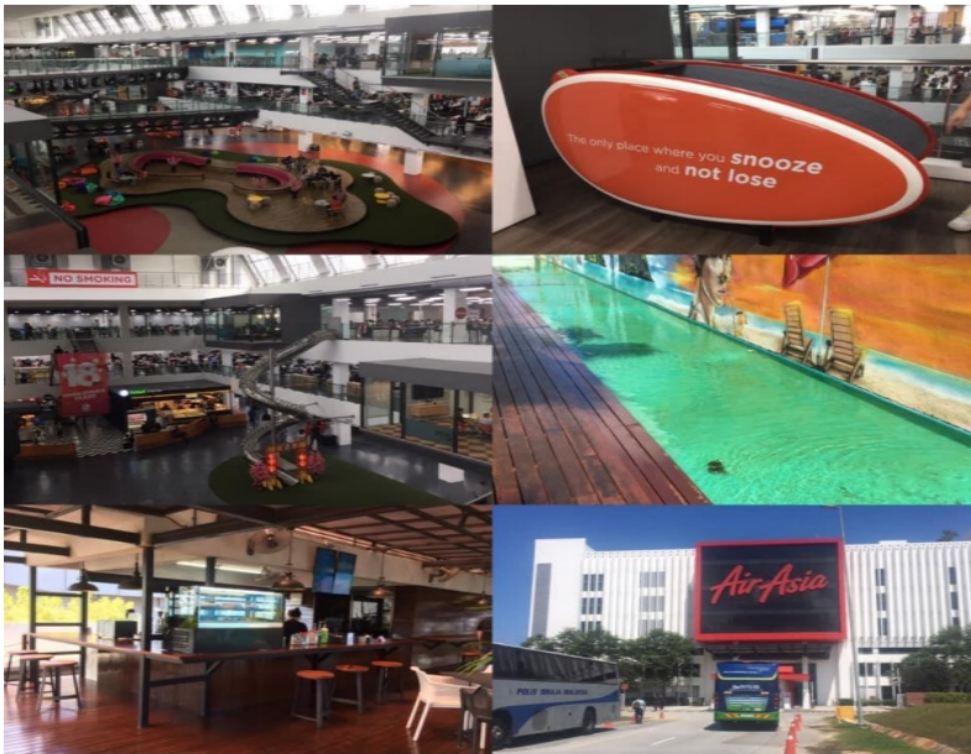
(Adapted from: Sivalingam, 2018)

Incorporate change into culture

To make change stick, it should become part of the core of the organisation, in other words the culture. The values behind the vision should be seen in every aspect of the organisation which gives the change a solid place in the company's culture. This helps existing staff and new leaders to continuously support the change.

AirAsia recognises that employees are essential to achieving its vision of being a digital company. This belief has developed a team orientated culture which allows colleagues to be creative and innovative. The company's quirky open space office is purposely designed to reinforce this type of culture. Facilities include a gym, a large eating area with a selection of food, sleeping area, roof top bar and even a helter-skelter! This vibrant working environment inspires communication and engagement with leaders including the CEO himself.

The team, referred to as 'Allstar', is encouraged to learn and pursue their passions while providing suggestions to leaders regardless of their role (Leadership Blog, 2013). Staff understand AirAsia's vision and actively focus on achieving high productivity and developing new digital ideas. This isn't something they are necessarily told to do, this is something they feel they need to do – essentially this has become the culture of the business.



53

(Source: Author's photos)

AirAsia has implemented changes to achieve its vision to be a digital company, while developing a team orientated culture and building on its strengths throughout the process. The company has successfully grown a unified set of behaviours which involves collaboration, transparency and innovation.

54

Continued momentum and leadership resilience have driven new behaviours within the organisation and has helped manage the culture in line with the change. The working environment is cleverly designed to support the way people work while new advanced systems and procedures reflect on AirAsia's ultimate goal of being a technology company. For AirAsia, 'business as usual' is change which is being reinforced by the company's proactive culture.

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Assignment 1

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

Instructor

This had the potential to be an excellent answer as you consider and apply issues but you need to use your theories and concepts to fully underpin and develop discussions. The closing sentence sums up the topic that business as usual is change which is reinforced by the corporate culture - perhaps therefore this could be seen as your strategic recommendation.

Unfortunately overall your answer fails to fully demonstrate the excellent potential it shows. Spend a little more time at the end ensuring your final draft fully develops the topic. The answer would benefit from using past tense when considering the research you have undertaken. More time is needed to proof read to correct a few referencing errors, typos and loose wording which is not masters level however generally work develops academic models and uses the field trip presentations experiences an case study.

You included detailed academic consideration of the research methods however this could be more concise enabling you to develop the findings in more depth.

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ASSESSMENT CRITERIA FEEDBACK

1. RESEARCH INFORMED LIT

Some excellent academic and industry research to support your discussions. Your article would have benefitted from greater engagement with the literature sources. Furthermore greater development and application of these sources would have helped you fully develop your discussions regarding managing change, digitalisation and empowerment.

14/20

2.KNOWLEDGE & UNDERSTANDING

Detailed use of change theories and concept and embraced both digitalisation and empowerment

however this could be further applied and developed regarding low cost airlines and travel sector trends and developments.

13/20

3. ANALYSIS

Some good analysis of theories and issues but the answer would benefit from developing issues in more depth with regard to Air Asia and using the theories to underpin these discussions.

Issues are discussed to reach the conclusions however you needed to develop this into strategic recommendations.

13/20

4. PRACTICAL APPLICATION AND DEPLOYMENT

Through the global field study trip and the visit to Air Asia, presentation and travel experiences you have developed a detailed understanding of the cultural developments at Air Asia relating to digitalisation and empowerment. Your final assignment needed remain focused on this and consider issue in further depth rather than covering the research methodology in as much depth.

14/20

5, SKILLS FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

You have demonstrated professional practice undertaking field study research and learning within the industry. You consider issues and apply theories however this needs further developing with regard to the airline and low cost sector. It is a shame that you did not fully apply the images to provide the insight and consideration of the culture developed within the HQ both visually and through systems and digitalisation.

Potential to be an excellent answer but some poor referencing and lack of final proofing along with the need for greater development and analysis to reach more detailed strategic recs has limited your grade.

12/20

Provisional grade subject to moderation and exam board approval. 67%

Mark agreed.

Considerable effort shown here but a greater degree of criticality required to attain a distinction level.

I enjoyed to see the student examine Saunder's research on however more work and understanding is required here. For example, the ontological position is concerned with the nature of social entities, and the two positions positivism and social constructionism (or interpretivism) in social science – are best applied to organisation and culture.

To get into the distinction category the student needs a range of up-to-date references. By using let us say Denzin and Lincoln (2000) a modern development or application of Denzin and Lincoln demonstrates their continued relevancy and seminal nature of the theorists.

Comments confirm the first marker.

PAGE 1



Comment 1

Title needs expanding or to be developed linked to key issues to relate to being a journal article



Comment 2

Why? expand



Comment 3

This would benefit from being applied to the travel industry where the concept of change and competition is intense



Comment 4

In the travel sector yield mgt is vital as seats are perishable & the revenue earners traditionally are business class however low cost airlines have changed this



Comment 5

and it manage the internal environment

Comment 6



develop this to consider the importance of corporate culture and it's relationship with mission and vision



Comment 7

good



Comment 8

Source needed



Comment 9

applied and underpinned rather than compiled



Comment 10

Answer is set up in article style with the opening but would benefit from images to support the article from the outset

PAGE 2



Comment 11

use past tense



Comment 12

Link to field study and link to his presentation where research was also generated



Comment 13

Need to consider that his presentation was delivering the corporate message and therefore related to the corporate culture and vision

PAGE 3



Comment 14

define and consider the issue of yield mgt theory within the travel sector



Comment 15

good but your with regard to yield mgt the article would also benefit from providing information on pax numbers and yield stats



Comment 16

revenue increased but profit dropped therefore needs discussing = was this the impact of changing costs or investments or other demand issues



Comment 17

discuss and underpin further



Comment 18

good but consider this with regard to the airline industry which is particularly volatile and effected by international crisis & events.



Comment 19

do not



Comment 20

Tour Operations is particularly effected by trends and change in terms of demand, changing destinations and yield - tourism models from Plog link to explain this along with generational marketing within the sector



Comment 21

need to explain this as it was key issue



Comment 22

good



Comment 23

Anyone can write a corporate culture but within the empowered tourism sector it is how you bring the culture alive and live and breath it which matters as it effects guest service, performance excellent, CLASS & KPI's all effecting financial success and yield



Comment 24

In view of the impact that culture has on Air Asia's corporate offices the article would have benefitted from the use of images of the extreme facilities



Comment 25

good but take this further to link to the corporate image of Air Asia and its HQ



Comment 26

expand - needs to consider the 4 cultures



Comment 27

good but could have further developed this with industry models



Comment 28

Discuss further and consider the implications of 1990's change strategies to 2020 within the fast changing travel sector



Comment 29

good now relate this to Tony Fernandez and Air Asia

PAGE 6



Comment 30

good



Comment 31

this is not suitable wording for an academic journal article and instead you could develop this with regard to digitalisation within the travel sector



Comment 32

this is what you needed to relate to Thomas Cook and could be compared to Hays Travel



Comment 33

here you can add your observational research regarding digitalised check in and bag drop & it's impact on reducing costs and increasing profits along with turnaround time - Average turn round is 35 minutes for Air Asia flights which is fastest in the world and remember that on average airlines are charged £1k per minute on the gate.....impacts are significant



Comment 34

Need to consider the importance of their empowerment strategy in creating an organisation which embraces change and which is a digital leader



Comment 35

good but need to explain that this includes private messaging the CEO

PAGE 7



Comment 36

did not



Comment 37

this links to empowerment theory



Comment 38

good but needs expanding



Comment 39

expand



Comment 40

this even goes as far as enabling movement in and out of the airport via the tunnel between the

corporate offices and the airport terminal



Comment 41

Again images from the corporate HQ would support your discussions and underpin



Comment 42

they do, consider the all star system

PAGE 8



Comment 43

excellent



Comment 44

relate this further to Air Asia



Comment 45

date



Comment 46

good

PAGE 9



Comment 47

good but you could develop this further with regard to ai



Comment 48

good but would benefit from including images of the facilities



Comment 49

running track, doggy day care etc



Comment 50

sleeping pods not areas



Comment 51

expand - re open plan office and line ups



Comment 52

online impact and chats

PAGE 10



Comment 53

good but these would have benefited from being broken up and included through out the article and to have included ai re website, airline experience and check in etc



Comment 54

good but needed to underpin further the evidence to support this



Comment 55

good - would like you to have considered the difference between the casual HQ and smart cabin crew



Comment 56

needs to develop this further into recommendations which could have linked to the issues of profit v revenue