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Research article

Organisational culture and operational efficiency in high-pressure tourism services organisation contexts

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of organisational culture on operational efficiency at XYZ Ltd, a leading service provider operating in a high-pressure tourism environment. The research explores cultural dynamics that shape operational practices and identifies barriers to efficiency. Guided by Total Quality Management (TQM), the McKinsey 7S Framework, and the Competing Values Framework (CVF), the study adopts a qualitative interpretivist approach, using semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 23 employees across departments. Findings from the study reveal that while XYZ Ltd benefits from structured leadership, flexible work arrangements, and digital transformation initiatives, inefficiencies persist. These include excessive workloads, centralised decision-making that limits managerial autonomy, and weak psychological safety, which constrains innovation. Additional challenges involve inconsistent cross-department collaboration, unclear role definitions, and inadequate feedback mechanisms. A gap exists between stated organisational values, such as trust and initiative and their practical application. The study concludes that improving operational efficiency requires cultural transformation beyond technical adjustments. Recommendations include decentralising decision-making, empowering managers, strengthening feedback loops, enhancing collaboration, and implementing sustainable workload management. These insights offer broader implications for tourism services-oriented organisations seeking to align culture with efficiency and employee well-being.

KEYWORDS

Organisational culture; operational efficiency; tourism industry; employee well-being; cultural transformation

Introduction

Organisational culture is increasingly recognised as a critical determinant of operational performance, particularly in high-demand service industries such as tourism. In fast-paced environments where efficiency directly influences client satisfaction and profitability, culture shapes decision-making, adaptability, and service delivery beyond mere employee morale. The interplay between organisational culture and operational efficiency remains widely debated in both academic and business circles. Advocates argue that a strong, adaptive culture fosters teamwork, aligns behaviours, and enhances decision-making, thereby driving operational excellence (Ruth et al., 2019). Conversely, critics caution that rigid cultural norms can create bottlenecks, slow processes and inhibit innovation (Habib et al., 2022). Globally, service-driven organisations leverage organisational culture to enhance operational efficiency. For example, Gheorghe & Muntean (2024) explain that Four Seasons promotes a culture that prioritises employee well-being, motivation, and professional development through training, mentoring, and balanced performance expectations. They further note that by discouraging excessive overtime and supporting effective stress and time management, the company maintains a productive and engaged workforce, which ultimately strengthens service performance and operational efficiency. Similarly, Ritz-Carlton promotes a culture of

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empowerment that enables employees to respond proactively to guest needs. Through its well-known "$2,000 rule," employees are authorised to spend up to USD 2,000 per guest to resolve problems or enhance experiences without managerial approval, allowing immediate service recovery and reducing operational delays (BeBusinessSmart, 2025).

In Botswana's tourism sector, organisational culture plays a critical role in shaping operational efficiency, particularly within complex and resource constrained environments. At industry level, digital transformation initiatives promoted by the Botswana Tourism Organisation, including the use of virtual tourism tools, reflect a growing cultural shift toward innovation, adaptability, and data driven decision making, all of which support improved responsiveness and streamlined operations (Weekend Post, 2024). At organisational level, companies such as Wilderness Safaris (2024) demonstrate how this shift is translated into practice through the adoption of advanced technologies, including laser scanning at Chitabe and Chitabe Lediba, which enhances planning accuracy, reduces rework, and improves resource utilisation. However, sector wide challenges persist, as studies by Gabasiane & Chiguvi (2023) and Motshegwa & Oshamo (2024) highlight that organisational culture in many tourism businesses is still characterised by skills shortages, limited collaboration, knowledge hoarding, and bureaucratic processes, all of which hinder efficient operations. This study addresses that gap by examining XYZ, a Botswana based tourism service provider in the business of providing travel connections and concierge services. Tourism is a vital contributor to Botswana's economy, contributing approximately 5% to the country's GDP (Botswana Country Commercial Guide 2025, www.trade.gov), and service providers like XYZ play a pivotal role towards this by delivering uncompromised seamless guest experiences. Operating under intense pressure to provide 24-hour itinerary turnaround, XYZ faces challenges such as high workloads, centralised decision-making, and limited innovation opportunities, all of which hinder operational efficiency.

A key theme in this discourse is digital transformation, which introduces tension in high-touch industries like tourism, where automation must coexist with personalised service (Tandafatu et al., 2024). Another emerging perspective advocates for "sustainable efficiency," integrating psychological safety, work-life balance, and employee empowerment (McKinsey & Company, 2021). While earlier research, such as that of Schein (2010), argued that organisational culture is difficult to measure due to its intangible nature, later work highlights that the lack of clear definitions and consistent measurement approaches continues to create challenges in accurately assessing organisational culture (Chatman & Choi, 2019). However, more recent scholarships suggest that culture can be examined through observable organisational behaviours and communication patterns. Ugoani (2021) and Abolnasser et al. (2023) argue that analysing behavioural patterns and communication flows can reveal the tangible impact of culture on operational outcomes. Similarly, Reader & Gillespie (2023) propose that organisational culture can be assessed through unobtrusive indicators derived from organisational data sources such as company reports, digital records and behavioural patterns. This research critically explores how XYZ's organisational culture influences operational efficiency, focusing on workload pressures, decision-making, innovation, and technology integration. The main research question asks: How does the existing organisational culture at XYZ company influence its operational efficiency? The study aims to evaluate this impact and provide recommendations to improve cultural elements that hinder efficiency. The study objectives include assessing the contribution of current culture, identifying aspects that enhance or impede efficiency, and proposing cultural changes to improve performance. The study's Problem Statement is articulated as follows: XYZ's high workload environment forces employees to prioritise task completion over creative problem-solving, limiting process improvement. This aligns with industry findings (Chong et al., 2024), that excessive job demands reduce innovation and strategic reflection. Rising stress and disengagement further threaten morale and productivity, potentially increasing turnover and compromising service quality. Employees often rely on meaning-making to cope, reframing overload as growth opportunities or aligning efforts with organisational values like dedication and teamwork. While these interpretations foster resilience, they do not address systemic inefficiencies. Achieving operational efficiency would streamline processes, reduce waste, and free time for high-value tasks, enhancing flexibility and responsiveness without additional hiring. Ultimately, efficiency would support Company XYZ' s ability to maintain high service standards while safeguarding employee well-being.

Study rationale

Sustaining efficiency in a fast-paced environment requires aligning culture with process optimisation. Company XYZ' s current practices; quick turnarounds, frequent meetings, and structured reviews maintain service quality but may inadvertently create inefficiencies. Addressing these issues demands not only procedural adjustments but a cultural shift to overcome resistance and foster adaptability. The tourism industry's complexity, involving coordination among multiple stakeholders, underscores the importance of

efficiency for success. Despite XYZ's success in the market, understanding cultural factors that influence efficiency remains crucial. Organisational culture, defined by shared values and practices, significantly impacts performance. At Company XYZ, culture centers on seven core values: trust, happiness, development, initiative, relationships, dedication, and openness. While development is strongly embraced, initiative, key to efficiency is less evident, suggesting a need for greater emphasis. Over-prioritising development can lead to risk aversion and stifle creativity, limiting innovation essential for efficiency. Studies by Chong et al. (2024), highlight tools like Lean Management and Six Sigma for streamlining processes and reducing waste, as well as the benefits of employee involvement in fostering ownership and commitment. Emphasizing these initiatives at XYZ company could enhance operational performance and promote sustainable methods for achieving organisational goals. The study findings contribute to informing efficiency-enhancing practices applicable within XYZ and across similar tourism organisations. The insights may help Company XYZ refine leadership and cultural practices, improving job satisfaction and performance. Broader implications include lessons for other tourism services operators seeking to optimise operations in competitive environments. The study adopts a qualitative interpretivist approach, using semi-structured interviews and focus groups to gather in-depth insights. Purposive sampling was used as it ensures diverse representation, and thematic analysis identifies key patterns and relationships (Braun & Clarke's, 2006).

Theoretical background

Organisational culture is widely acknowledged as a critical determinant of operational efficiency, shaping how organisations respond to internal and external challenges. Foundational theories such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Schein's organisational culture model have influenced this discourse, but for operational contexts like XYZ', frameworks such as the Competing Values Framework (CVF), McKinsey 7S Framework, and Transformational Leadership Theory are more relevant. Organisational culture refers to shared values, behaviours, and beliefs that influence organisational practices (Ratnasari et al., 2023; Bogale & Debela, 2024). It evolves over time but can be reshaped to align with new goals. Operational efficiency, on the other hand, focuses on optimal resource utilisation to achieve outputs with minimal waste (Choi & Jung, 2017; Ruth et al., 2019). Efficiency differs from effectiveness, which is about achieving intended goals regardless of resource use. For efficiency to be meaningful, it must complement effectiveness. Operational Efficiency Models: Frameworks such as Total Quality Management (TQM) and Lean Principles dominate efficiency discourse. TQM promotes continuous improvement and employee involvement, while Lean Principles prioritises waste reduction and speed. Agile methodologies further emphasise adaptability and iterative processes, which have become crucial post-pandemic (McKinsey, 2021). However, these models require cultural support to sustain improvements.

Organisational culture models

Transformational Leadership Theory fosters psychological safety and autonomy, enhancing engagement but risks overdependence on leadership charisma. CVF categorises cultures into Clan, Adhocracy, Market, and Hierarchy, each influencing efficiency differently. Clan cultures promote collaboration, while hierarchical cultures often stifle innovation. McKinsey 7S Framework (1980) integrates cultural and structural elements; strategy, systems, staff, skills, structure, style, and shared values ensuring alignment but demanding significant resources (McKinsey & Company, 2008). Empirical evidence shows that cultural factors such as psychological safety, innovation climate, and leadership communication directly impact operational outcomes (Bozkurt & Ergeneli, 2012; Ugoani, 2021). For XYZ, balancing efficiency with cultural sustainability is essential to avoid burnout and disengagement.

Conceptual framing of the study

Building on the theoretical insights, the conceptual framework developed for this study integrates cultural and operational dimensions to explain how organisational culture influences efficiency at XYZ company. The framework combines elements from McKinsey 7S, CVF, and TQM, aligning leadership practices, shared values, and operational strategies. Core Components of the Framework are as follows: 1. Cultural Factors, which include leadership style, psychological safety, feedback structures, communication, autonomy, and workload culture. 2. Operational Enablers, which include digital transformation (Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems), knowledge management, time and workload management, and structured feedback loops. 3. Moderating Factors, which include high power distance cultures, tourism sector dynamics, and post-COVID hybrid work models. The framework posits that cultural alignment with operational strategies drives outcomes such as improved responsiveness, reduced bottlenecks, cost efficiency, employee well-being, and innovation capacity. For example, ERP systems enhance resource

allocation and supplier management but may reduce human interaction, creating tension between efficiency and cultural values. Similarly, flexible work arrangements improve productivity but require robust communication and infrastructure. When we compare the theories, Transformational Leadership vs McKinsey 7S—Leadership fosters motivation and innovation, while McKinsey ensures structural alignment. However, overemphasis can either limit agility or create dependency. TQM vs Lean—TQM promotes quality and teamwork but is resource-intensive; Lean reduces waste but risks over-optimisation in creative industries.

Implications for XYZ

The conceptual framework underscores the need for an integrated approach that balances operational efficiency with cultural sustainability. This involves fostering psychological safety, promoting initiative, leveraging technology without eroding human-centered values, and adopting flexible work models to enhance resilience.

Research methodology

This study adopts the interpretivist paradigm, which, according to (Saunders et al., 2019) views reality as socially constructed and best understood through qualitative inquiry. Interpretivism prioritises context and meaning (Smith & McGannon, 2022) making it suitable for exploring how organisational culture influences operational efficiency at XYZ. The philosophical stance comprises epistemology (constructivism), ontology (relativism), and axiology (value-laden) (Nowell et al., 2017), ensuring findings are ethically grounded and practically relevant. The study followed an inductive and exploratory approach in order to generate theories grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than testing predefined hypotheses. This flexibility allowed the research to adapt to emerging themes, uncovering complex cultural dynamics influencing efficiency. In terms of the research strategy and time horizon, the study used a mono-method qualitative design with a cross-sectional time horizon, capturing a snapshot of organisational culture at a specific point in time. While this limits longitudinal insights, it provides depth and relevance for the current operational context. Two primary methods were used to collect data, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Interviews were conducted with 13 participants using open-ended questions, enabling deep exploration of individual perspectives. Two focus groups (five participants each) facilitated discussion among employees, revealing shared experiences and collective views. Both methods allowed triangulation, enhancing credibility by cross-verifying data from different sources. A stratified purposive sampling approach was adopted to ensure representation across departments, roles, gender, and work arrangements. From XYZ's 105 employees, a sample of 23 participants (13 for the individual interviews and 10 for the focus group) was selected based on inclusion criteria (minimum six months' tenure and involvement in daily operations). This size aligns with qualitative research principles of prioritising depth over breadth and ensures data saturation (Smith & McGannon, 2022). With regards to Ethical Considerations, Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Derby Ethics Committee. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw. Data security was maintained through encryption and anonymisation of transcripts. The focus group participants signed confidentiality agreements. Data was analysed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework: familiarisation, coding, theme development, refinement, defining themes, and producing a coherent narrative supported by participant quotes. MAXQDA software assisted in systematic coding, and peer review of coding frameworks minimised bias. Trustworthiness of data was ensured by applying Lincoln & Guba's (1985) criteria guided measures to ensure rigour: credibility through member checking and triangulation; transferability via thick descriptions; dependability through an audit trail; and confirmability using reflexive journaling. The study however acknowledges the following limitations: The cross-sectional design limits insights into cultural changes over time. Reliance on self-reported data introduces potential response bias, mitigated through confidentiality assurances and neutral questioning. Findings are context specific to XYZ, reducing generalisability, though detailed descriptions enhance transferability.

Study findings

This section synthesises the key themes emerging from interviews and focus groups, illustrating how organisational culture at XYZ Ltd influences operational efficiency. The analysis addresses two sub-research questions: (1) How does the existing organisational culture impact operational efficiency? and (2) Which cultural aspects enhance or hinder efficiency. It is organised under the two sub-research questions (SRQs). The analysis draws on thematic coding and integrates theoretical frameworks such as McKinsey 7S, Total Quality Management (TQM), Lean principles, and Transformational Leadership theory. Biographical data-

for issues of confidentiality, is not provided in this paper, however a sample of 23 participants from XYZ organisation was used.

SRQ1: How does the existing organisational culture influence operational efficiency?

Theme 1: Workload and efficiency

Workload emerged as a dominant theme, influenced by complex tasks, manual processes, and inefficiencies associated with meetings. Employees reported that preparing bespoke itineraries typically requires between 30 and 60 minutes per request, with some more complex requests taking even longer. At the same time, staff are expected to meet a minimum daily target for itinerary preparation, highlighting the tension between delivering personalised travel experiences and maintaining the speed required for operational efficiency. "*Quoting for complex itineraries takes up to an hour per request or slightly longer for some". "We have desk checks, one-on-ones, and reviews that often feel repetitive." "During meetings people go into too much detail and unnecessary detail that's not going to affect me in any way, but I have to listen because that's what the meeting is about." "I know with XYZ the biggest thing is sticking to time limits, it's a very, very big issue, and most of the time it doesn't happen. That's what impacts everything. The longer you take, the more work piles up and just folds".* While Lean principles advocate eliminating waste, XYZ''s reliance on manual quoting illustrates a gap between theoretical efficiency and operational realities. Weekend duty work and after-hours labour were normalised, creating hidden workloads that distort performance assessments and increase fatigue. This aligns with research by the American Psychological Association (2023), which links sustained high-pressure environments to reduced productivity and engagement. Encouragingly, newer employees are challenging these norms, advocating for healthier boundaries, consistent with global trends towards work-life balance (World Economic Forum, 2021).

Theme 2: Pressure and performance culture/ cultural norms and informal practices

The 24-hour response policy, intended to enhance client satisfaction, has inadvertently fostered a culture of constant availability. Employees equate busyness with dedication, discouraging breaks and reinforcing fatigue. This contradicts TQM principles, which emphasise sustainable productivity and employee well-being (Pawanr et al., 2025). The findings suggest that XYZ's performance culture prioritises visible activity over quality, suppressing creativity and long-term resilience. Cultural scripts within XYZ Ltd influenced decision-making and workflow prioritisation. Employees described how unwritten rules often dictated resource allocation and task urgency. This resonates with the McKinsey 7S framework (1980), particularly the 'shared values' component, illustrating how deeply embedded norms can override formal systems. While these practices sometimes enabled flexibility, they also introduced inconsistencies that hindered standardisation and continuous improvement.

Theme 3: Management and leadership and psychological safety

The data revealed that leadership behaviours significantly influenced employees' sense of psychological safety. Some participants highlighted that open communication and supportive leadership styles fostered trust and collaboration. "*My manager is approachable; I can raise concerns and get feedback immediately." "I think my manager is very supportive; she's always there to give guidance when needed."*and *"My manager is very open. If there are challenges, you just approach them, and they are open to conversations."* However, in some instances, patterns of inconsistent application across different teams were observed, suggesting that these practices were not uniformly implemented throughout the organisation, such as "*It's difficult to own up to a mistake because you'll get a lot of backlashes", "Managers assume other managers are right before even asking us what happened*" and "*I like that XYZ acknowledges mistakes as part of learning. But I've also heard really sad stories from others—so it depends on who your manager is".* These findings align with Transformational Leadership theory (1985), which emphasises empowerment and vision-sharing. For example, managers who encouraged dialogue and acknowledged employee contributions were perceived as catalysts for innovation and efficiency. Conversely, hierarchical and punitive approaches created fear, reducing proactive problem-solving. The study uncovered tension between innovation aspirations and operational realities. Although management promoted a culture of innovation, most frontline staff reported limited autonomy to experiment. This gap reflects a misalignment between strategy and systems, echoing TQM's emphasis on holistic integration. Successful innovation requires not only structural support but also cultural readiness, which was uneven across departments. Leadership was widely praised for structure and support, yet systemic inefficiencies persist due to centralised decision-making and bureaucratic approval layers. Most employees expressed frustration with hierarchical processes that slow responsiveness and limit managerial autonomy. This dynamic undermines Transformational Leadership principles, which advocate empowerment and distributed authority. Overemphasis on coaching further reinforces dependency, creating a paradox where developmental intentions restrict autonomy.

SRQ2: Which cultural aspects enhance or hinder operational efficiency?

Theme 4: Automation and systems

Digital transformation efforts have improved efficiency but remain partial and exclusive. Most employees welcomed automation initiatives but criticised limited involvement in AI projects, which were confined to a select task team. This exclusivity undermines TQM principles of inclusive engagement. Fragmented IT systems and reliance on external providers for basic fixes further constrain agility. ERP integration was incomplete, with reservations and accounting systems operating in silos. To realise full benefits, XYZ must democratise digital initiatives, empower internal IT teams, and prioritise system integration. Automation emerged as a double-edged sword. While digital tools streamlined repetitive tasks, their implementation without adequate training created resistance and errors. Lean principles advocate waste reduction, yet findings suggest that poorly managed automation can generate new inefficiencies. Most employees stressed the need for participatory design and iterative feedback loops to ensure technology complements rather than disrupts workflows.

Theme 5: Time management and meetings

Unproductive meetings emerged as a major inefficiency. Most employees reported frequent, lengthy sessions lacking clear objectives or time discipline, echoing global findings that 70% of meetings are counterproductive (Harvard Business Review, 2022). "*I think it's just with certain topics—people feel very passionate about them and that's when they start forgetting the time limit of the meeting and it just goes on and on"* and *"People go into too much detail. Unnecessary detail that doesn't affect me in any way, but I still have to listen because that's what the meeting is about"*. Poor structuring and hierarchical dominance exacerbate delays, while repetitive feedback sessions create frustration. Lean principles advocate eliminating non-value-adding activities; XYZ should adopt smarter meeting practices and leverage asynchronous tools to reduce time waste.

Theme 6: Accountability and follow-ups

A culture of repeated reminders has become normalised, diverting time from proactive execution. Employees expressed frustration with reliance on follow-ups and perceived preferential treatment for those with direct access to senior leadership. This reactive approach erodes morale and efficiency. Strengthening accountability and enforcing equitable procedures are essential to shift from reactive to proactive task management.

Theme 7: Work-life balance

While flexible work arrangements exist, decision-making around remote work remains bureaucratic, requiring escalated approvals. Most employees called for greater autonomy for immediate managers to approve short-term flexibility. Despite positive shifts in attitudes—particularly among newer staff advocating boundaries—after-hours work persists as a marker of loyalty, for instance "*Some staff work during leave to avoid backlog on return", "Can you imagine how much work is done after-hours? I think if we were to measure this, we will be shocked, or maybe some people can come to a realisation that they are overworking"* and "*The new staff recruits have taught us to protect our time and well-being more. Now this looks like performance has dropped, but no… people are starting to set boundaries more, and it just feels different because we weren't used to saying no or stopping at five. I often find myself doing extra hours because I can't afford to carry over yesterday's work to tomorrow. Already we do a lot in a day, and now imagine if that had to pile up".* Formal policies to regulate overtime and support well-being are needed to prevent unhealthy workplace competition and distorted performance assessments.

Theme 8: Cross-department collaboration

Ineffective communication between departments, lack of shared training, and inconsistent knowledge-sharing systems were some of the study findings which consequentially hinder operational synergy. Employees highlighted missed opportunities for proactive engagement and transparency. Expanding cross-departmental training and satellite visits, coupled with structured knowledge-sharing platforms, would enhance collaboration and efficiency.

Theme 9: Psychological safety and innovation

Despite formal feedback channels, some employees reported hesitancy to voice ideas or admit mistakes due to fear of judgement or blame, such as "*I like that XYZ acknowledges mistakes as part of learning. But I've*

also heard really sad stories from others—so it depends on who your manager is" and *"Managers don't easily admit mistakes, they try to find loopholes that push the responsibility back to staff. It creates a culture of blame."*
Mistakes depend on who you work with. My manager is really accommodating, but the experiences that others share are really sad". This lack of psychological safety undermines innovation and continuous improvement. While some teams foster developmental approaches, experiences vary widely. *"You only get that one shot to say something, and then people label you, and* the other said *I tone down my contributions, so I don't look a certain way."* creating silos of trust. Building a consistent culture of openness and learning is critical to sustaining engagement and creativity. Innovation at XYZ is largely leader-led, with ideas from senior management fast-tracked while frontline suggestions face delays or neglect. Transparent innovation pipelines and crowdsourced suggestion platforms could democratise idea evaluation and strengthen cultural commitment to continuous improvement. Table 1 below shows the synthesis of the study findings.

Table 1: Synthesis of findings

Research Objective	Theme	Manager Perspective	Non-Manager Perspective	Interpretation	Recommendation
Objective 1	Workload and Efficiency	Managers reported operational inefficiencies such as repetitive meetings, administrative tasks assigned to managers, and delayed HR processes. Some managers noted frustration with unnecessary meeting discussions.	Non managers highlighted time-consuming tasks such as complex itinerary quotations and repeated requests for already shared information.	Both groups recognise inefficiencies in workflow and information sharing that increase workload and reduce operational efficiency.	Streamline operational processes, reduce duplicated administrative work, and improve information flow across teams.
	Pressure and Performance Culture	Managers indicated lot of work pressure and the needing to often catch up after hours especially due to training and back-to-back meetings. Some managers expressed that it should be acceptable not to be constantly busy and recognised the need for breaks.	Many non-managers reported working overtime to avoid backlog and questioned expectations to remain busy even during quieter periods.	Managers experience stronger operational pressure than non-managers, suggesting uneven perceptions of workload demands across organisational levels.	Reinforce healthy workload expectations and clarify organisational views on productivity and rest.
	Time Management	Managers acknowledged that meetings frequently exceed time limits because discussions become too detailed.	Non managers expressed frustration that extended meetings contribute to work piling up.	Poor time discipline in meetings contributes to operational inefficiencies across teams.	Introduce structured meeting agendas and enforce time limits.
Objective 2	Automation and Systems	Managers indicated that operational work sometimes requires multiple documents and raised concerns about internal IT waiting for external support.	Non managers reported that only a limited group participated in AI initiatives and highlighted operational challenges caused by fragmented systems.	Digital transformation initiatives exist but operational processes remain fragmented and dependent on external support.	Improve system integration and upskilling IT team and actually trusting their capability
	Management and Leadership	Managers described supportive leadership and trust within teams, but some managers also questioned hierarchical layers that require escalation to higher levels.	Non managers reported supportive managers who provide guidance, but also noted multiple reporting layers and uncertainty about decision authority.	Leadership support exists but organisational hierarchy can slow decision-making and create confusion around authority.	Reduce unnecessary escalation layers where possible.
	Accountability and Discipline	Managers acknowledged that reminders are often required by both manager and staff and before tasks are completed and certain individuals receive different treatment/levels of understanding.	Non managers reported frustration when procedures are not consistently followed and noted that some individuals bypass procedures due to connections with senior leadership	Inconsistent adherence to procedures creates operational inefficiencies and perceptions of unfairness.	Strengthen accountability mechanisms and enforce consistent procedural compliance.
	Cross Department Collaboration	Managers noted that better understanding of operational realities across departments would improve collaboration.	Non managers reported that they often only learn about other departments' processes when problems occur.	Limited cross departmental understanding contributes to miscommunication and inefficiencies.	Introduce regular cross departmental knowledge sharing and training initiatives.
	Psychological Safety	Some managers acknowledged that their own manager criticism is louder over praise. Some also reported shaping their own responses carefully to avoid misinterpretation.	Some staff reported positive learning experiences when mistakes were treated constructively, while others expressed fear of backlash or being labelled after speaking up.	Experiences of psychological safety vary significantly depending on leadership style and team environment.	Encourage leadership practices that promote constructive feedback and normalise learning from mistakes.
Objective 3	Innovation and Improvement	Managers observed that initiatives introduced by senior leadership tend to be implemented quickly.	Non managers reported that employee suggestions often take years to be implemented unless supported by management.	Innovation appears to be influenced strongly by hierarchy, with ideas gaining momentum when supported by leadership.	Introduce transparent processes for tracking and reviewing employee suggestions.
	Work-Life Balance	Some managers acknowledged that newer staff are beginning to protect their personal time, while others emphasised that work-life balance is largely an individual responsibility.	Some staff reported working during leave or after hours to avoid backlog, while others are beginning to set stronger boundaries.	Expectations around work-life balance are inconsistent across teams and individuals.	Introduce clearer organisational guidelines on workload and protected time policy on meetings, leave protection, and after-hours work.

The findings reveal a complex interplay between cultural norms, leadership behaviours, and operational practices. Strengths include structured leadership and digital ambitions, while challenges centre on workload pressures, hierarchical decision-making, fragmented systems, and limited psychological safety. Addressing these issues requires cultural transformation alongside technical improvements, embedding inclusivity, accountability, and well-being into operational strategies.

Analysis of Findings

Workload at XYZ Ltd is shaped by complex tasks, manual processes, and meeting inefficiencies. Many employees reported that producing itineraries often takes 30–60 minutes per request, reflecting the tension between personalised service and operational speed. Despite resources such as cheat sheets, reliance on manual systems persists, limiting efficiency. A culture of overwork and blurred boundaries between work and personal life was evident, with staff frequently working after hours to meet deadlines. This hidden pressure distorts workload assessments and risks burnout. Encouragingly, newer employees are challenging these norms, advocating for healthier work-life boundaries. The company's 24-hour response policy, while designed to enhance client satisfaction, has normalised constant availability and intensified stress. Most employees described a culture where busyness is equated with dedication, discouraging breaks, and fostering fatigue. This emphasis on visible activity over quality undermines sustainable productivity and creativity. Aligning with Total Quality Management (TQM) principles, XYZ Ltd must balance performance expectations with employee well-being to prevent burnout and maintain long-term efficiency. Organization XYZ's leadership is widely praised for its structure, professionalism, and support. Managers were commended for proactive problem-solving and clear communication. However, systemic inefficiencies persist due to centralised decision-making and bureaucratic approval layers. Most employees expressed frustration with hierarchical processes that slow responsiveness and limit managerial autonomy. Overemphasis on coaching further reinforces dependency, contradicting transformational leadership principles that advocate empowerment and autonomy.

Digital transformation efforts have improved efficiency but remain partial. Most employees welcomed automation initiatives but criticised limited involvement in AI projects, which were confined to a select task team. This exclusivity undermines TQM principles of inclusive engagement. Fragmented IT systems and reliance on external providers for basic fixes further constrain agility. ERP integration is incomplete, with reservations and accounting systems operating in silos. To realise full benefits, XYZ Ltd must democratise digital initiatives, empower internal IT teams, and prioritise system integration. Unproductive meetings emerged as a major inefficiency. Employees reported frequent, lengthy sessions lacking clear objectives or time discipline, echoing global findings that 70% of meetings are counterproductive. Poor structuring and hierarchical dominance exacerbate delays, while repetitive feedback sessions create frustration. Lean principles advocate eliminating non-value-adding activities; XYZ Ltd should adopt smarter meeting practices and leverage asynchronous tools to reduce time waste. A culture of repeated reminders had become normalised, diverting time from proactive execution. Most employees expressed frustration with reliance on follow-ups and perceived preferential treatment for those with direct access to senior leadership. This reactive approach erodes morale and efficiency. Strengthening accountability and enforcing equitable procedures are essential to shift from reactive to proactive task management.

While flexible work arrangements exist, decision-making around remote work remains bureaucratic, requiring escalated approvals. Employees called for greater autonomy for immediate managers to approve short-term flexibility. Despite positive shifts in attitudes—particularly among newer staff advocating boundaries—after-hours work persists as a marker of loyalty. Formal policies to regulate overtime and support well-being are needed to prevent unhealthy workplace competition and distorted performance assessments. Internal mobility supports individual growth, but cross-functional collaboration remains weak. Ineffective communication between departments, lack of shared training, and inconsistent knowledge-sharing systems hinder operational synergy. A number of employees highlighted missed opportunities for proactive engagement and transparency. Expanding cross-departmental training and satellite visits, coupled with structured knowledge-sharing platforms, would enhance collaboration and efficiency. Despite formal feedback channels, employees reported hesitancy to voice ideas or admit mistakes due to fear of judgement or blame. This lack of psychological safety undermines innovation and continuous improvement. While some teams foster developmental approaches, experiences vary widely, creating silos of trust. Building a consistent culture of openness and learning is critical to sustaining engagement and creativity. Innovation at XYZ Ltd is largely leader-led, with ideas from senior management fast-tracked while frontline suggestions face delays or neglect. Most employees expressed frustration over lack of visibility and feedback on their contributions, discouraging proactive engagement. Transparent innovation pipelines and crowdsourced suggestion platforms could democratise idea evaluation and strengthen cultural commitment to continuous improvement. Across both SRQs, the interplay between culture, leadership, and technology was evident. Efficiency is not solely a function of process optimisation, but a socio-technical

phenomenon shaped by trust, shared values, and adaptive systems. These insights underscore the need for integrated interventions that combine cultural transformation with structural reforms.

The findings collectively reinforce the argument that organisational performance is contingent upon cultural alignment and leadership agility. For instance, psychological safety emerged as a prerequisite for Lean implementation, as employees are more likely to embrace change when they feel secure. Similarly, the McKinsey 7S framework provides a useful lens for understanding why automation initiatives falter in the absence of supportive leadership and shared values. Moreover, the evidence suggests that efficiency strategies must transcend technical fixes. While automation and process mapping are critical, they cannot substitute for cultural adaptability. This aligns with socio-technical systems theory, which posits that organisational outcomes depend on the joint optimisation of social and technical subsystems. In practical terms, managers should prioritise cultural audits alongside technology rollouts. Training programs must be designed not only to impart technical skills but also to reinforce collaborative norms. Leadership development initiatives should emphasise transformational behaviours, equipping managers to inspire and guide teams through uncertainty. The findings collectively reinforce the argument that organisational performance is contingent upon cultural alignment and leadership agility. For instance, psychological safety emerged as a prerequisite for Lean implementation, as employees are more likely to embrace change when they feel secure. Similarly, the McKinsey 7S framework provides a useful lens for understanding why automation initiatives falter in the absence of supportive leadership and shared values.

Discussion of results

The findings reveal that organisational culture at XYZ Ltd significantly shapes operational efficiency through interconnected factors such as workload management, decision-making structures, and inclusivity in innovation. While the company demonstrates strengths; structured leadership, flexible work arrangements, and digital transformation initiatives, persistent cultural challenges undermine agility and sustainability. A culture of overwork has normalised excessive workloads, particularly during peak seasons, creating stress and burnout. The 24-hour response policy, intended to enhance client satisfaction, inadvertently fosters constant availability and discourages rest. This aligns with literature on Lean principles, which advocate eliminating wasteful practices and prioritising employee well-being for sustainable productivity. Supporting this, American Psychological Association (2023), argue that surface-level productivity pressures limit employees' ability to engage in deeper, value-adding work, while Harvard Business Review (2022) highlights how stress and disengagement reduce organisational performance. At XYZ, this pressure is evident in reduced speed, accuracy, and engagement during peak periods, reflecting findings by the American Psychological Association (2023) that sustained high-pressure environments lead to decreased productivity and long-term disengagement.

Leadership within the organisation is perceived as supportive; however, decision-making remains highly centralised, creating operational bottlenecks and slowing responsiveness. Multiple layers of approval limit managerial autonomy and delay routine decisions, reducing efficiency and increasing dependency on senior leaders. This contradicts Transformational Leadership Theory, which emphasises empowerment, autonomy, and psychological safety as key drivers of engagement and effectiveness (Davis & Thilagaraj, 2022; Almahasneh et al., 2023). At XYZ, senior leaders remain heavily involved in operational matters, restricting middle managers' ability to exercise initiative and respond proactively. Similar patterns are observed in the Saudi Arabian hotel sector, where rigid hierarchies suppressed innovation and discouraged employees from challenging established norms (Abolnasser et al., 2023). Consequently, without structural changes to decentralise authority, the organisation risks continued inefficiencies, delayed decision-making, and missed opportunities for innovation and improved performance.

Automation and AI initiatives have improved efficiency but remain exclusive to select teams, undermining Total Quality Management (TQM) principles of collective participation. Employees expressed frustration over limited involvement, reducing engagement and adoption success. Fragmented IT systems and reliance on external administrators further constrain agility. While employees recognise the value of automation, the exclusivity of the AI Task Team has led to frustration and reduced engagement, particularly as frontline staff feel their practical insights are overlooked. This reflects the principles of Total Quality Management, which emphasise that continuous improvement requires the active involvement of all employees across the organisation (Isolocity, 2023; Kaizen Institute, 2024) as well as Ugoani (2021), who notes that exclusion from change processes can foster passive resistance. Furthermore, Bozkurt & Ergeneli (2012) argue that successful automation depends not only on technological capability but also on broad organisational adoption and collaboration. These challenges are compounded by fragmented IT systems and reliance on external administrators, which further constrain agility and limit the organisation's ability to fully realise efficiency gains.

Cross-departmental collaboration is weak, with poor communication and lack of shared training contributing to delays. Psychological safety is inconsistent; employees hesitate to voice concerns or propose ideas due to fear of blame. This inhibits innovation and continuous improvement, echoing research linking psychological safety to adaptability and resilience. A structured approach to interdepartmental training and knowledge sharing would enhance operational efficiency by ensuring that employees understand how functions interconnect and feel confident engaging across departments (Mehner, et al., 2024). However, this effectiveness is limited where psychological safety is inconsistent, as employees may still hesitate to voice ideas or concerns, constraining innovation and continuous improvement (University of Pretoria, 2024).

Innovation processes are leader-driven, with frontline ideas often delayed or disregarded. Transparent and inclusive mechanisms for evaluating ideas are absent, discouraging proactive engagement and limiting employee contribution. This challenges the value of feedback loops, which, when functioning effectively, transform employee input into actionable change and support continuous improvement (Psico Smart, 2024). This limitation is particularly evident in hierarchical environments, where top-down decision-making reduces the likelihood that frontline ideas are meaningfully considered or implemented. This reflects Chili & Ngxongo's (2017) findings in the South African hospitality sector, where innovation is often constrained by leadership-driven implementation processes. Consequently, the lack of inclusive innovation practices undermines both creativity and operational performance. In summary the findings suggest that operational efficiency at XYZ Ltd appears to be culturally mediated. Addressing workload pressures, decentralising decision-making, fostering inclusivity in digital transformation, and strengthening psychological safety are critical for operational efficiency and sustainable improvement.

This study makes several important contributions to theory, practice, and methodology. It extends the understanding of organisational culture within high-pressure tourism services environments by demonstrating how implicit norms and informal practices shape operational efficiency and employee well-being. While prior research has often focused on structural or technological determinants of performance, our findings highlight the cultural underpinnings that sustain or hinder adaptive behaviours. This perspective enriches the literature on organisational resilience and cultural dynamics by offering a nuanced view of how micro-level interactions influence macro-level outcomes. The study provides actionable insights for tourism establishment managers seeking to balance efficiency with employee engagement. By uncovering the cultural scripts that govern decision-making and interpersonal relations, we offer a roadmap for interventions that foster transparency, collaboration, and psychological safety. These recommendations are particularly relevant for organisations operating under stringent time and resource constraints, where cultural inertia can exacerbate operational bottlenecks. The research underscores the value of qualitative interpretivism in exploring complex social phenomena. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, we capture the lived experiences of employees, revealing subtleties that quantitative approaches might overlook. This methodological stance not only validates the richness of qualitative inquiry but also invites future scholars to adopt multi-layered approaches when investigating organisational culture.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, the research is based on a single organisational context, which may limit the generalisability of findings. Cultural dynamics observed in XYZ Ltd might differ significantly from those in other sectors or geographic regions. Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, as participants may have portrayed their experiences in a favourable light. Third, the cross-sectional design restricts our ability to capture cultural evolution over time, leaving questions about the durability of observed patterns unanswered. Future research should address these limitations by adopting longitudinal designs that track cultural shifts across different organisational life cycles. Comparative studies across industries and countries would also enrich our understanding of how contextual factors mediate cultural influences on performance. Additionally, integrating mixed-method approaches - combining qualitative depth with quantitative breadth—could yield more robust insights into the interplay between culture, structure, and outcomes. Scholars might also explore the role of digital transformation in reshaping cultural norms, particularly in organisations transitioning to hybrid or remote work models.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the cultural foundations of operational efficiency within XYZ Ltd, a high-pressure service organisation. Our findings reveal that organisational culture is not merely a backdrop but an active force shaping behaviours, decisions, and ultimately performance outcomes. By illuminating the implicit norms and informal practices that govern daily operations, we provide a lens through which managers and scholars can better understand the drivers of organisational resilience.
The implications of these findings extend beyond XYZ Ltd. They invite a rethinking of efficiency strategies that prioritise cultural alignment alongside structural and technological interventions. For practitioners, this

means investing in cultural audits, leadership development, and communication frameworks that promote openness and adaptability. For researchers, it signals the need for deeper engagement with cultural variables in performance models, moving beyond surface-level metrics to capture the lived realities of organisational life. In closing, we argue that sustainable efficiency is inseparable from cultural vitality. Organisations that cultivate inclusive, transparent, and adaptive cultures will be better positioned to navigate uncertainty and complexity. This study offers a starting point for that conversation, laying the groundwork for future inquiries into the cultural dimensions of organisational success.

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