

Recognition from Afar

How can you recognize your employees' efforts while working remotely?

BY MARK DAVID

It seems like an eternity since people were regularly working in offices across the country. But in reality, it has only been a few months. Before physical distancing rules took effect, communicating with staff and recognizing their efforts was straightforward. But the transition to mobile operations has impacted recognition norms, and human resources teams are working feverishly to ensure their employees' efforts are not going unnoticed.

NUMBERS DON'T LIE

One of the main challenges faced by employers is how to keep their staff engaged and motivated while working remotely. In the virtual office,

daily meetings, check-ins and flexible work schedules certainly help this cause. But recognizing employees' efforts and personal achievements is a different matter, and making the effort goes a long way, especially if the company has an established recognition program or system.

An O.C. Tanner survey conducted from April 27 to May 1, 2020, showed a 47.4% increase in employee engagement as a result of regular recognition efforts, and 58.6% of respondents said they were more likely to trust leadership as well.

However, the results also indicated that companies without an active recognition program during the pandemic

saw a 48.6% drop in employee engagement. "When the pandemic first hit, we had clients in Canada put their recognition [programs] on hold," says Chris Vyse, Vice-President of Sales and Business Development for O.C. Tanner Canada. "[The clients] said they couldn't recognize [employees] because there were no managers there to handle the recognition, and employees weren't there to receive their awards."

Employers realized quickly that suspending or halting such programs was detrimental to morale and workplace culture.

"Over time, several of these clients came back ... to do the recognition remotely," Vyse



**CHRIS
VYSE**

Vice-President of
Sales and Business
Development for
O.C. Tanner Canada

Some employees may not necessarily enjoy being in the spotlight. Instead of public acknowledgement, they might prefer a personal email, handwritten note or one-on-one chat with a supervisor.



**DEREK
WOOD**

Regional Vice-
President for Robert
Half Canada

says. “There are some tactical challenges, but nothing that can’t be overcome through planning and using some of the remote tools available.”

The tactical challenges associated with remote recognition are often organizational in nature. For instance, management must coordinate a time for a virtual recognition session with the entire team. They must also ensure they have the recipients’ home addresses on file if they mail out or hand-deliver the awards.

Employees enjoy being appreciated, whether virtually or in-person. So it’s up to management to ensure the company is effectively recognizing their work.

It is equally important for companies to “be consistent with their recognition,” says Derek Wood, Regional Vice-President for Robert Half Canada. “If you do it ad hoc, whether it is with an individual or a team, [or] if it happens inconsistently, it can have an adverse effect in the sense that it looks like favouritism.”

Management should also have their employees’ best interests in mind when implementing a recognition program. They are typically not a one-size-fits-all solution, and the last thing you want is to have a motivational tool that does more harm than good.

“Think about what will motivate each individual,” says Wood. “For example, while one individual might prefer the opportunity to attend a conference, another might appreciate having his or her achievements relayed to senior management.”

For example, some employees may not necessarily enjoy being in the spotlight. Instead of public acknowledgement, they might prefer a personal email, handwritten note or one-on-one chat with a supervisor. They may also prefer to have a token of gratitude sent directly to their homes.

“For our team-based awards, which are given by managers at the end of a quarter, we would typically hand them out in person and perhaps make a speech,” explains Michelle Brooks, Vice-President of People and Culture for Security Compass, a cybersecurity firm with offices in Toronto.

“Now, we are doing that via Zoom,” Brooks continues. “For our more introverted employees, we aren’t [recognizing] them publicly; we send a prize directly to their houses instead. Doing so creates an opportunity for less visible but highly impactful feedback.”

PROGRAM MAINTENANCE

Employee recognition programs should not be treated as a spur-of-the-moment occasion. They

should become a regular part of the workplace routine in order to realize their potential to motivate staff.

“The key to maintaining [the program] as a manager is making recognition a part of your regular schedule, setting aside time weekly and monthly, and making it a priority,” says Wood. “The program should be structured enough that it doesn’t get left behind or forgotten as other things come up; it needs to be engrained in the fabric of leadership.”

It is also vital to ensure the program evolves to meet the staff’s changing needs as the workplace continues its remote operations. “Before [the pandemic], you could see how hard [these employees] were working [in the office]. It’s not that we are worried that they’re not working [remotely] or that there are trust issues; that’s not the problem at all.”

“What we have tried to do to solve this problem is engage our front-line managers to have more touch points with these employees to discuss the work they are doing. They are paying particular attention to these quieter [employees] and not letting them drift into the background.”

THE FUTURE

Remote work has forced Canadian employers to re-examine how they recognize



**MICHELLE
BROOKS**

Vice-President of People
and Culture for Security
Compass

their employees. Some companies have used this transition to enhance the ways they celebrate their staff's achievements. But as many workplaces continue their online operations, they realize that even the purest forms of recognition are effectively motivating their team.

"I think many people will walk away from this situation and realize that recognition is a lot easier than they might have thought," says Wood. "It doesn't need to be a giant event-planning [scenario] with coordination to appreciate the efforts of [employees]. A simple shout-out, call, email or gift card is not costly and is just as effective."

Technology helps to enhance recognition during the pandemic. "We use a software tool [for virtual recognition] called 7Geese. It allows employees to send peer-to-peer recognition to anyone within the company, and we align it to key attributes we foster. These attributes include embodying our corporate values and going above and beyond to create positive customer experiences."

"Using this tool, employees decide who they want to recognize and the category, and the [award] goes directly to that employee's inbox. It is also copied to the manager, and from there it is sent to the

main 7Geese screen. Anyone who logs in can see a list of anyone who has ever received that award."

Some companies will use their time away from the office to re-examine the purpose of their recognition programs. The success of a program hinges on whether or not it resonates with the staff. "To keep the program evolving, supervisors should take the time to sit down with their staff during regularly scheduled touch-base meetings or performance reviews to discuss which rewards they find most meaningful," says Wood. "Anonymous informal surveys also can be used to gather feedback on recognition activities."

Brooks says, "It's important that people feel connected to the purpose [of the program] and that their work impacts the company and the world." Focusing on that gets people motivated and more willing to put their best effort forward."

A return to the physical office may still be months or even a year away. Nevertheless, whether done over video conferencing, emails, phone calls or in-person, a little recognition goes a long way. **YW**

Mark David is a Toronto-based freelance writer.

7 Tips to Run an Effective Recognition Program

Thinking about starting an employee recognition program in your company? Or just looking to revamp the one you already have? An effective employee recognition program should contain these seven elements:

1. Adequately funded: Management should have a budget set aside for recognition procedures and enable employees and supervisors to run them properly. While working remotely, this budget should cover e-gift certificates or postage for mailing awards to employees.

2. Relevant: The program must directly align with the corporate mission, values and goals. Because goals can change when everyone is off-site, the program should be modified (with the help of employee input) to reflect the changes and communicated to all employees.

3. Appropriate: The achievements and behaviours that are rewarded must be clearly defined, and the awards must be meaningful to the recipients. Reward requirements can change with remote work. Inform employees of the changes and get "buy-in."

4. Timely: Many companies set aside specific days for recognition, but moving to remote work allows them to recognize their staff through virtual connections.

5. Sincere: Conduct the distribution of the awards in a genuine and heartfelt manner. If conducted remotely, team members should agree to meet over video conferencing at a specific time, and management should email award-winners accordingly.

6. Straightforward: The recognition process should be as uncomplicated as possible. A team-wide video conference, where all award recipients are acknowledged, is appropriate.

7. Open to evaluation: Periodic re-evaluation ensures relevance, fairness and the achievement of the program's objectives.

Source: Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM)