

# The State of Employee Recognition

Recognition Powers  
High Performance



## Introduction

High-performing cultures don't happen by accident. They are created when employees trust one another, feel seen and valued, and choose to do their best work even when no one is watching. Employee recognition is one of the most practical ways leaders can inspire healthy, high performance at scale.

Organizations have invested heavily in technology to increase productivity, communication, and automation. Those tools create efficiency and access, but they do not automatically create belonging, loyalty, or pride. Why?

Because technology can't do the human work that connects people. But recognition can. Done well, recognition becomes cultural infrastructure: a daily practice that strengthens relationships, connects employees to what matters, and reinforces what great work looks like.

This year's findings show recognition works best when it strengthens social ties. Recognition that deepens peer relationships, leader-team bonds, and connection to the organization drives the outcomes leaders care about: trust, retention, employee advocacy, great work, and ultimately, high performance. Recognition that stays transactional rarely creates momentum.



# 4,243

EMPLOYEES SURVEYED IN THE UNITED STATES, AUSTRALIA, CANADA, CHINA, FRANCE, GERMANY, INDIA, SINGAPORE, THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, AND THE UNITED KINGDOM. WE ALSO CONDUCTED NINE FOCUS GROUPS WITH EMPLOYEES, LEADERS, AND HR PROFESSIONALS ACROSS THE UNITED STATES.

**This report will show the return on investment of recognition that strengthens workplace relationships, and the costs when recognition is merely transactional.**

"Recognition allows a person to feel seen. Everyone is working hard, so to not be seen while you're working so hard is disheartening. Whenever I am complimented on something that I did well, it gives me a new breath of fresh air. I feel refreshed. I feel like my colleagues see me. I'm professional. I'm revered as somebody with an important skill."

—INSURANCE AGENT, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

## What we discovered

This report translates our research into evidence-backed best practices, starting with a clear stake: recognition delivers its strongest cultural and business impact when it's intentionally designed, embedded into daily work, and focuses on strengthening workplace relationships. When recognition is built this way, employees don't just feel better, they perform better. We see 43x higher odds of trust in the organization, 25x higher odds of great work, and 26x higher odds of plans to stay another year.

Strengthening workplace relationships through recognition is more important than ever. Teams are becoming more dispersed, and budget cuts, coupled with growing demands for higher

performance, have impacted teambuilding and connection. This combination increases the risk of work becoming purely transactional, which is exactly when trust, collaboration, and discretionary effort start to wane. Integrated recognition that is designed to strengthen relationships becomes a way to keep people connected to each other and to the performance standards they're trying to meet.

This also explains why recognition programs are stalling: technology and awards don't drive adoption on their own. Without intentional modeling, ongoing encouragement, recognition champions, and visible

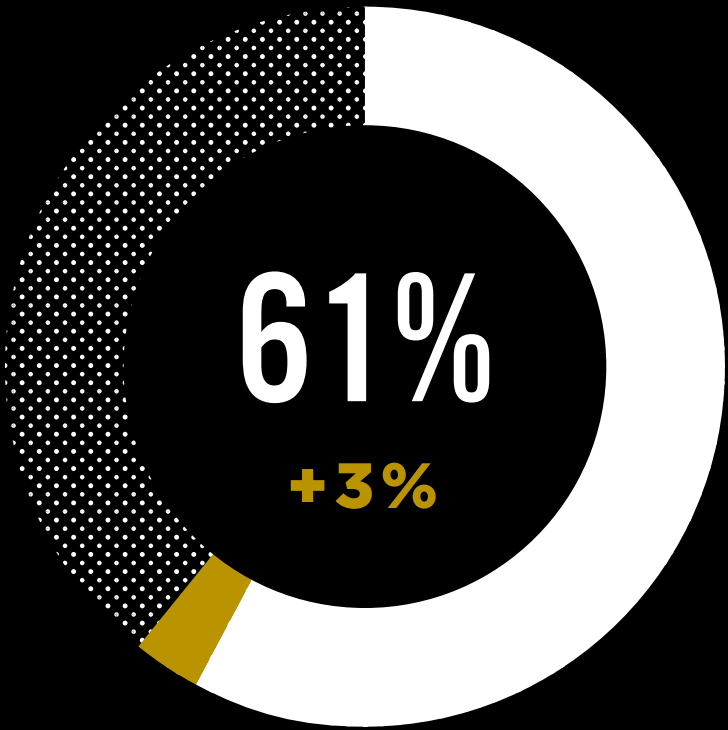
leadership support, recognition stays optional, and optional systems don't change behavior.

In practice, that's where many programs lose impact. Recognition becomes easy to send, but harder to feel. Templated notes and bulk awards can increase activity, yet employees read sincerity through specificity, personal voice, and social context. When those cues are missing, recognition stays transactional, and the performance outcomes leaders are aiming for stay out of reach. The next sections break down the critical elements that make recognition more specific, social, and sustaining, so it strengthens the relationships that healthy high performance depends on.

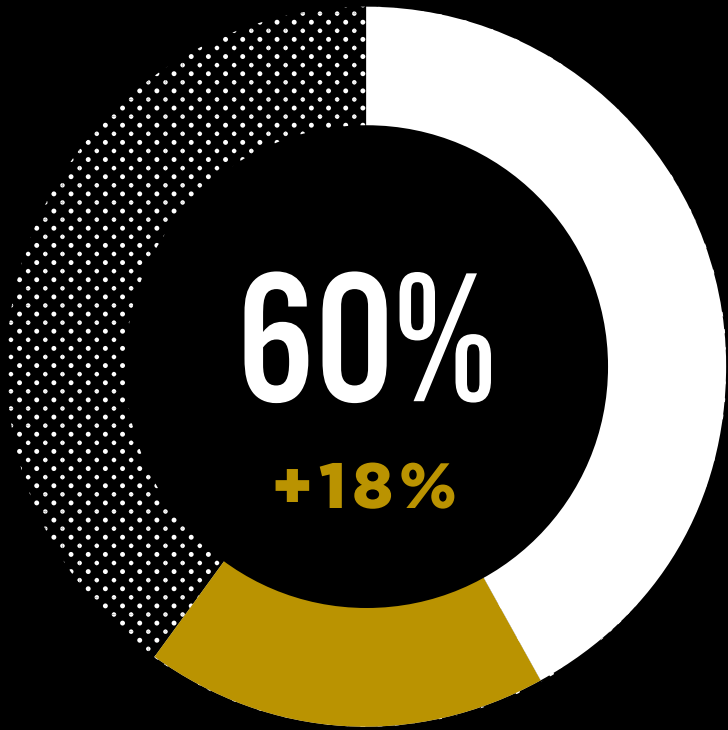
# State of employee recognition

This year's data shows recognition is more prevalent and more often happening in person. More employees report receiving recognition in the past 30 days, and more recognition includes an in-person element. At the same time, more employees say their organization is doing a good job promoting its recognition program.

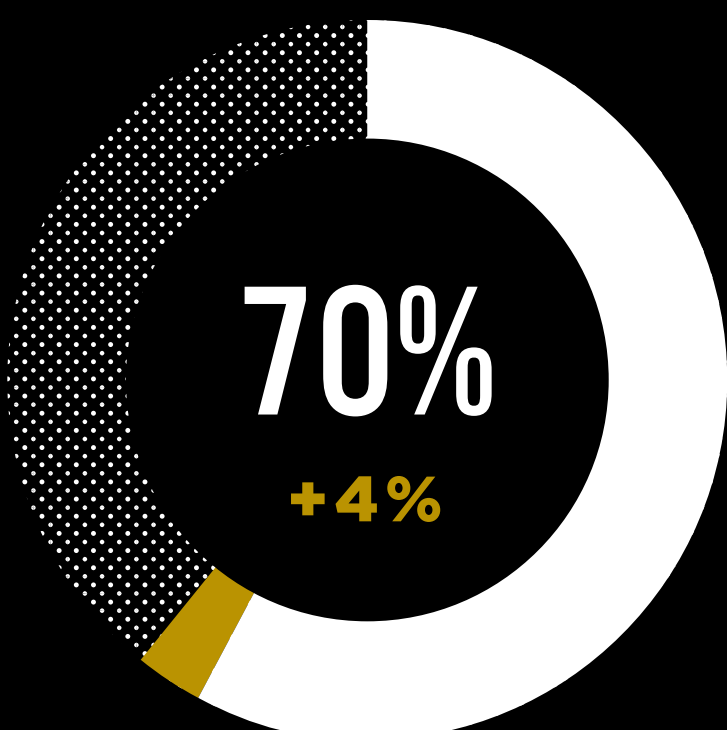
Together, these shifts suggest that recognition is becoming more embedded in how organizations are trying to support engagement and high performance, not just offered as a standalone program.



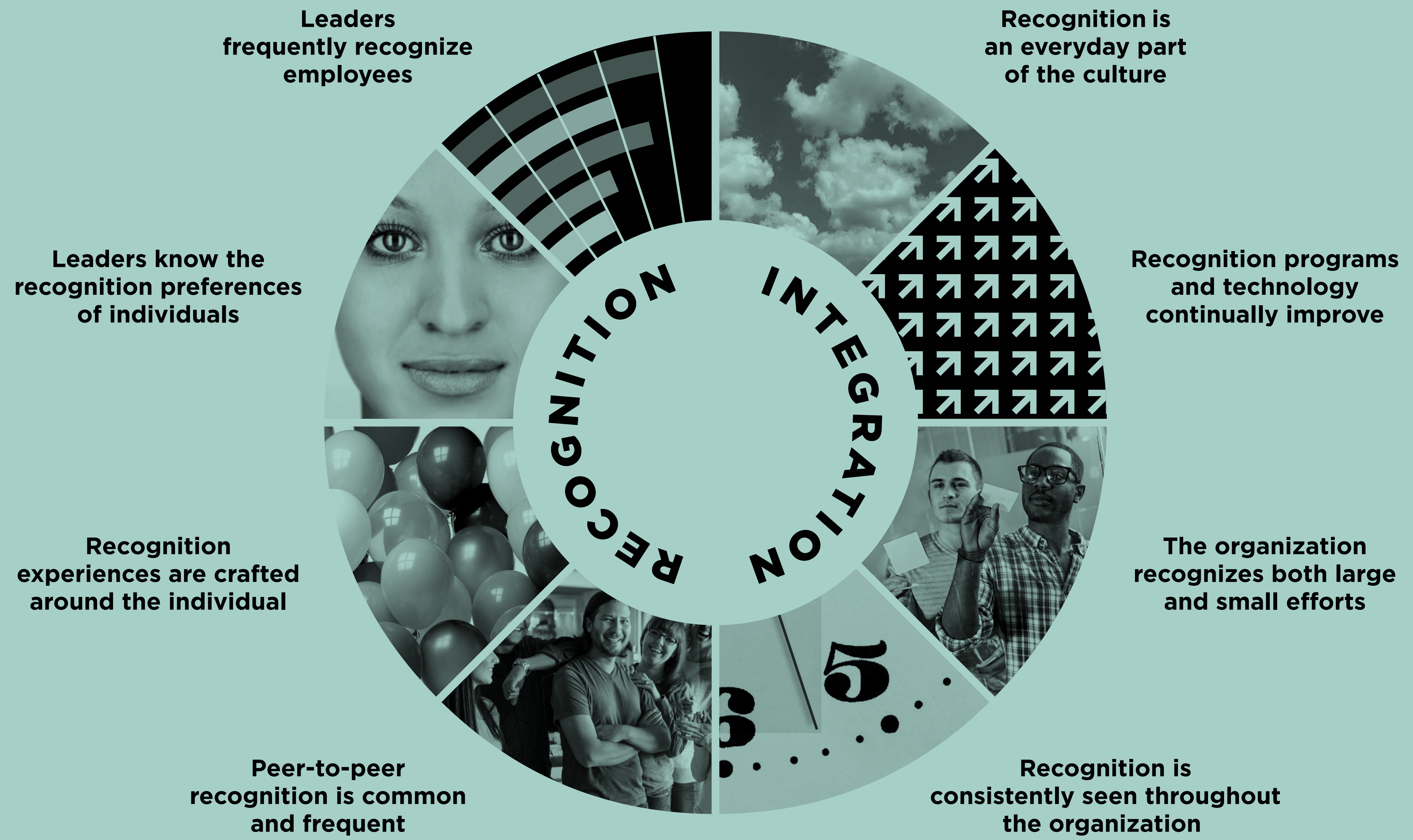
**61% OF EMPLOYEES HAVE RECEIVED RECOGNITION IN THE LAST 30 DAYS COMPARED TO 58% IN 2025**



**60% OF RECOGNITION GIVEN HAD AN IN-PERSON ELEMENT COMPARED TO 42% IN 2025**



**70% FEEL THE ORGANIZATION DOES A GOOD JOB PROMOTING THEIR RECOGNITION PROGRAMS COMPARED TO 66% LAST YEAR**



# The Value of Integrated Recognition

Integrated recognition is not a platform feature. It is a pattern. It shows up as recognition that is frequent and visible, reinforced by leaders, and woven into the everyday flow of work. Technology can make it easier, but integration is ultimately cultural: people know what gets recognized, who recognizes it, and how to participate.

Our research continues to demonstrate that integrated recognition has the most significant impact on personal, cultural, and business outcomes like high performance and promoting the organization as a great place to work. Because integrated recognition instills a sense that organizations are invested in employees' growth and long-term future, employees feel and demonstrate more trust, loyalty, and ownership in its success.

WHEN RECOGNITION IS INTEGRATED:	INCREASED ODDS
Employees have a high level of trust in the organization	<b>12x</b>
I plan to work at the organization one year from now	<b>12x</b>
There is a culture of honesty at my organization	<b>11x</b>
Increased odds of doing great work	<b>11x</b>
My organization produces quality products	<b>10x</b>
I am personally invested in the organization's success	<b>9x</b>
High Employee Net Promoter Score	<b>7x</b>

## SECTIONS

The Business Case for Human-Centered Recognition

Recognition Unites Diverse and Dispersed Teams

Social Connection Fuels Recognition Tech Adoption

Designing Awards for Lasting Impact

The Power of Recognition Champions

# The Business Case for Human-Centered Recognition



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THE BUSINESS CASE  
FOR HUMAN-CENTERED  
RECOGNITION

RECOGNITION  
UNITES DIVERSE AND  
DISPERSED TEAMS

SOCIAL CONNECTION  
FUELS RECOGNITION TECH  
ADOPTION

DESIGNING AWARDS  
FOR LASTING IMPACT

THE POWER OF  
RECOGNITION CHAMPIONS

Recognition is a two-way exchange between employees and their organizations. When employees feel valued and appreciated at work, and their workplace takes care of them by providing community and growth, they respond with higher effort, stronger commitment, and better work.

But that exchange breaks when recognition becomes purely transactional. Recognition that feels automated, gamified, or forced may increase activity, yet it rarely increases connection in the moment. And connection is the mechanism. Employees don't give their best when they receive a generic "thank you." They perform at their best when recognition connects them to what they have accomplished, why it mattered, and to one another.

*When recognition helps employees feel seen as people, they are more willing to help their organization succeed.*

**8x**

**MORE LIKELY TO DO GREAT WORK WHEN RECOGNITION HELPS WITH CAREER GROWTH**

**7x**

**MORE LIKELY TO STAY ANOTHER YEAR WHEN RECOGNITION HELPS BUILD RELATIONSHIPS**

**7x**

**MORE LIKELY TO BE PERSONALLY INVESTED IN THE ORGANIZATION'S SUCCESS WHEN RECOGNITION PROGRAMS BUILD COMMUNITY AT WORK**

## Authentic, integrated recognition boosts ROI

Authentic recognition strengthens connection because it reflects both achievement and humanity. It highlights not just what someone accomplished, but how they contributed, what strengths they used, and what their work made possible for others. That kind of recognition builds trust, raises standards, and reinforces the behaviors a high-performing culture depends on.

Recognition is also more likely to build relationships, community, and a sense of long-term care and investment in employees when it is integrated into the organization's culture. There are 12x increased odds that recognition builds community when it is integrated.

Integrated, community-building recognition doesn't just feel good. It produces a tangible ROI on how employees see the organization and how they work. Trust, great work, pride, and retention all soar.

CULTURE AND BUSINESS ROI	INTEGRATED, HUMAN-CENTERED RECOGNITION
I am personally invested in the organization's success	21x
My organization produces quality products	24x
Employees at my organization trust the HR department	25x
I value my organization's policies and procedures	33x
There is a culture of honesty at my organization	36x
Employees have a high level of trust in the organization	43x
High employee Net Promoter Score	13x
Great work	25x
Plans to work at organization one year from now	26x

"It's always helpful when my manager tells me someone I've worked with gives an example of what I did well. That makes me want to work harder. I also trust that my manager will give me feedback in areas I can grow. With the recognition I'm getting, I am also asking that they keep me honest, which builds rapport in my team."

—TELECOMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONAL, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



## RECOMMENDATIONS

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**Create meaningful, authentic recognition experiences for your people rather than relying on technology to send generic, impersonal messages of appreciation**

**Celebrate the efforts and human side of accomplishments, not just results**

**Integrate recognition into everyday culture and processes so it's frequent, personal, and visible**

## Capital One

While [Capital One](#) has recognition technology fully integrated into their processes and systems, they emphasize that recognition is a human experience rather than a transaction. Instead of just handing out awards, employees and leaders create memorable recognition experiences and share stories that celebrate both the accomplishments and the individual employees behind them.

The result is more than checking a participation box. It shows up in employee sentiment: stronger motivation to contribute, deeper peer connection, and higher fulfillment.

As their HR Director notes, “the power of recognition and appreciation can impact engagement. It impacts attrition, it impacts net promoter score. There is a business return when you do it the right way.”

# Recognition Unites Diverse and Dispersed Teams



"Recognition makes  
you want to be a  
better team player."

—HOSPITAL ADMINISTRATOR,  
FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

High performance is dependent on how well people work together: trust, coordination, and shared standards are foundational. As teams become more dispersed and more diverse, those conditions are harder to achieve. When you're working across time zones, cultures, and screens, it's easier to become invisible, and harder to feel like you belong. Connection becomes a performance variable.

65%

OF CORPORATE  
EMPLOYEES WORK  
ON TEAMS THAT ARE  
DISPERSED

35%

WORK WITH SOMEONE  
IN THEIR DEPARTMENT  
WHO LIVES OUTSIDE  
THEIR COUNTRY

62%

OF EMPLOYEES SAY  
BUDGET CUTS HAVE  
IMPACTED THEIR  
ABILITY TO ENGAGE IN  
TEAMBUILDING

The upside of inclusion is measurable. When teams are inclusive, employees are 4x more likely to be promoters, teams are 20x more likely to be innovative, and the organization is 8x more likely to be financially healthy.

At the same time, many organizations are trying to do more with less. Budget cuts, coupled with growing demands for higher performance, are shrinking the time and resources available for teambuilding, even as the underlying cost of disconnection climbs. When employees feel a lack of inclusion in their teams, anxiety and burnout rise, directly affecting productivity and innovation.

Recognition can help fill that gap. Integrated recognition is one of the few repeatable practices that can be done from anywhere and that strengthens social ties in the flow of work. It brings people together across distance and difference, making contribution visible, reinforcing shared standards, and building the cohesion high performance depends on.

On dispersed and multicultural teams, the ROI of relationship-building recognition is even stronger.

**Recognition  
brings people  
together, across  
distances and  
differences.**

"If more people are going to work remotely, then recognition becomes more important. If you're physically a little bit disconnected from everyone else, you're going to need that morale boost from the recognition. More human interaction is always good."

—SOFTWARE DEVELOPER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

ROI OF INTEGRATED  
RECOGNITION THAT  
BUILDS CONNECTION  
ON GEOGRAPHICALLY  
DISPERSED TEAMS

Team has  
lower turnover  
compared to  
other teams

6x

Team has good  
communication

47x

Feeling  
everyone on the  
team contributes  
a valuable  
perspective

44x

Team excels at  
collaboration

51x

**Recognition  
increases  
collaboration  
and trust,  
which improves  
performance**

Recognition can act as connective tissue for teams that don't share the same physical space or cultural backgrounds. It helps foster positive relationships by enhancing communication, camaraderie, goal setting, and the [practice of hope](#). It complements team-building activities that might be hard to coordinate remotely,

and it can create connection for teams on a more regular basis. This is true for both geographically dispersed teams as well as multicultural teams where team members of different backgrounds work together in the same location.

When teams working in different locations recognize one another regularly in meaningful ways that build connection, it shows each member is uniquely valued and improves communication, leading to increased collaboration and retention. Even though employees may be physically apart, the human aspect of recognition brings them together.

For multicultural teams working in the same location, human-centered recognition quickly builds trust and alignment, supporting agility and execution.

**The Impact of Recognition on Multicultural Teams**

	INTEGRATED RECOGNITION THAT STRENGTHENS CONNECTION
Team members quickly pivot if something isn't working	<b>10x</b>
High level of trust among team members	<b>27x</b>
Team regularly reaches its goals	<b>34x</b>
Leader understands everyone on the team	<b>50x</b>

In our research, the business impact of integrated, human-centered recognition is often stronger on dispersed and multicultural teams than on the overall employee population. Recognition meets a universal human need, and the payoff is highest in environments where connection may be harder to achieve.

**Business ROI of Integrated, Human-Centered Recognition**

	ALL EMPLOYEES	MULTICULTURAL TEAMS	DISPERSED TEAMS
Employee Net Promoter Score	<b>13x</b>	<b>10x</b>	<b>15x</b>
Great Work	<b>25x</b>	<b>25x</b>	<b>44x</b>
Plans to work at organization one year from now	<b>26x</b>	<b>34x</b>	<b>34x</b>

# Leaders should leverage team recognition

Recognition is a practical way for leaders to easily build community and inclusion on their teams. By recognizing their teams for large and small efforts, personal milestones, and even for taking risks and failing, leaders can reinforce a sense of team unity and belonging and improve their relationships with employees.

Tools like eCards, personal notes, formal recognition, shout-outs during team meetings, and even sharing recognition an employee has already received are all tangible ways leaders can show appreciation to each employee for their individual contributions and emphasize their important role on the team. Leader recognition helps connect employees to a bigger purpose and to one another.

INCREASED FEELINGS OF INCLUSION WHEN DIRECT LEADERS RECOGNIZE:



Individual milestones



Team milestones



Big accomplishments



Small accomplishments



Team effort, even if they fail

"If you're working on something and it falls through, especially if it's not your fault (or even if it is), people make mistakes. Recognizing your efforts might make you want to do better or learn and keep going rather than be discouraged. It'll be more motivational if recognition happens."

—HOSPITAL ADMINISTRATOR, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



## RECOMMENDATIONS

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**Leverage recognition to foster inclusion and belonging on teams, especially for multicultural and geographically disparate teams**

**Build regular recognition into the everyday employee experience to complement existing teambuilding activities and inclusion efforts**

**In addition to recognition from leaders, ensure [peer-to-peer recognition tools](#) are available and accessible for all employees to use**

# Social Connection Fuels Recognition Tech Adoption



THE BUSINESS CASE  
FOR HUMAN-CENTERED  
RECOGNITION

RECOGNITION  
UNITES DIVERSE AND  
DISPERSED TEAMS

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SOCIAL CONNECTION  
FUELS RECOGNITION TECH  
ADOPTION

DESIGNING AWARDS  
FOR LASTING IMPACT

THE POWER OF  
RECOGNITION CHAMPIONS

Technology has become a core part of most recognition programs today, helping employees give and receive recognition easily.

For recognition technology to work, a few foundational elements must be in place. The platform needs to be accessible to all employees, including frontline and offline workers who may not regularly use computers or have reliable internet access at work. When access is limited, there is 24% decreased odds of employees logging in.

The technology should be easy to use, and employees should feel empowered to use it to give recognition. When employees don't feel empowered to use recognition tools, there is 37% decreased odds of employees logging in.

Even when these basics are covered, many organizations still struggle to sustain engagement. In our research, 37% of employees do not use their recognition technology often to recognize coworkers, and 21% of employees log into their recognition platforms less than once a month.

Organizations may launch a recognition program with real fanfare, but if employees log in once and don't return, the platform doesn't become integrated into how work happens.

So, what separates platforms that get used from platforms that sit on the shelf? The answer is not more features. It's social connection.

## Peer influence drives recognition technology engagement

We uncovered the biggest influencer of how employees view recognition technology: their workplace relationships. Just as we rely on friend and family recommendations when making a purchase or finding a service provider, employees rely on social cues to determine if they should engage with recognition technology.

Employees are far more likely to use recognition technology when their peers, leaders, and senior leaders use it, model it, and encourage them to use it. When employees see others engaging with recognition tools and hear the organization regularly communicating and encouraging the use of tools, they feel more empowered to use the tools themselves. Even the most skeptical employees will view recognition technologies in a more positive light when they see those around them using them. Peer influence shapes behavior at work as much as it does in our personal lives.

**Employees are twice as likely to use a recognition platform when they see other employees consistently use the platform.**

83%

OF EMPLOYEES APPRECIATE SEEING PEOPLE BEING RECOGNIZED PUBLICLY THROUGH AN ONLINE PLATFORM

74%

INCREASE IN EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION WITH RECOGNITION PLATFORMS WHEN SENIOR LEADERS ENCOURAGE THEIR USE

4x

INCREASED ODDS OF LOGGING IN WHEN THE ORGANIZATION ENCOURAGES EMPLOYEES TO LOG IN AT LEAST ONCE PER MONTH

42%

DECREASED ODDS OF LOGGING INTO THEIR RECOGNITION PLATFORM WITHOUT REGULAR COMMUNICATION ABOUT THE PROGRAM

## **Awards themselves are not enough to drive adoption**

A common misperception is that if awards are appealing enough, employees will flock to a recognition program. Awards do matter. Monthly logins increase when employees believe reward offerings are extensive (79% higher odds) and valuable to them (148% higher odds). And employees who log in at least once per month are 95% more likely to describe reward options as valuable.

But awards don't create sustained adoption on their own. Without a culture where recognition is valued and modeled by peers and leaders, points become a short-term incentive, not a lasting habit. Encouragement from coworkers, leaders, and the organization does more to normalize platform use than "shiny" rewards without human connection behind them.

"The last time I even used our recognition program, I remember there was an incentive value to it. But there's no culture behind this—we don't have a culture of recognition, so many of my colleagues don't even know it exists."

—IT PROFESSIONAL, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

# Regular users create a ripple effect

Employees who use recognition technology regularly don't just engage more—they help others engage more as well, paying it forward. Using recognition tools regularly inspires more platform engagement, increases overall recognition usage, and contributes to stronger relationships with peers and leaders.

OUTCOME	INCREASED ODDS WHEN LOGGING INTO RECOGNITION TECHNOLOGY ONCE A MONTH
I encourage my coworkers to use my organization's recognition platform.	<b>3x</b>
My organization's recognition platform makes me feel appreciated for my work.	<b>3x</b>
The relationship between my direct leader and I has improved as a result of my direct leader recognizing me through my organization's recognition platform.	<b>3x</b>
Relationships between my coworkers and I have improved as a result of me receiving recognition from them through our organization's recognition platform.	<b>3x</b>

**When employees use their recognition technology and adoption increases, it begins to create a habit of appreciation, which has a tangible impact on culture and business outcomes.**

WHEN EMPLOYEES LOG INTO THEIR RECOGNITION PLATFORMS AT LEAST ONCE PER MONTH, THERE ARE:



Higher odds of engagement



Higher odds employee plans to stay at least 2 more years



Decreased odds of burnout



Increased odds of great work



increased odds of promoting the organization as a great place to work



## RECOMMENDATIONS

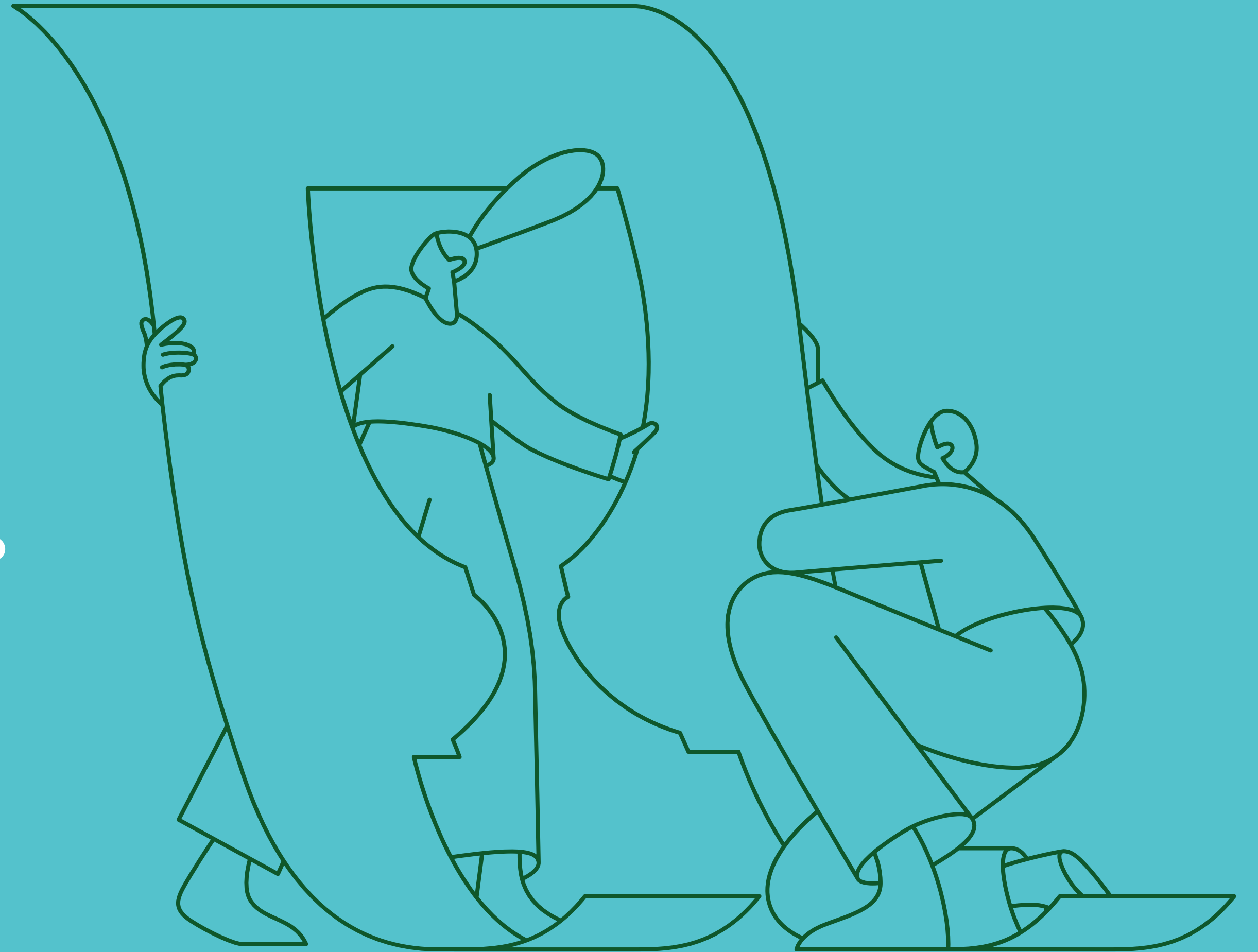
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**Ensure recognition technology is easy to access, simple to use, and available to all employees, including your frontline and offline workers**

**Leverage the power of peer influence by encouraging leaders and peers to model giving recognition through your tools regularly**

**Make recognition visible so employees can see and learn how peers are using the recognition technology to appreciate one another**

# Designing Awards for Lasting Impact



THE BUSINESS CASE  
FOR HUMAN-CENTERED  
RECOGNITION

RECOGNITION  
UNITES DIVERSE AND  
DISPERSED TEAMS

SOCIAL CONNECTION  
FUELS RECOGNITION TECH  
ADOPTION

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DESIGNING AWARDS  
FOR LASTING IMPACT

THE POWER OF  
RECOGNITION CHAMPIONS

# 72%

**OF EMPLOYEES  
SAID THEIR MOST  
RECENT RECOGNITION  
EXPERIENCE INVOLVED  
AN AWARD**

The story of achievement doesn't have to end when the project is done.

Awards are not the point of recognition. They are the artifact. When an award is chosen well and paired with a meaningful moment, it does something technology can't. It carries the story forward after the project ends.

In the best recognition experiences, an award becomes a symbol of the work itself. It reminds an employee what they accomplished, why it mattered, and that someone noticed. That memory is part of the ROI. It strengthens pride, connection, and the belief that great work is worth repeating.

But awards often fall flat.

Generic items, cash-only approaches, and endless catalogs can turn recognition into a transaction. Even "unlimited choice" can feel

impersonal or overwhelming if the experience lacks intention. When the award does not match the achievement or the person, the message changes. It stops saying "we see you" and starts saying "we checked a box."

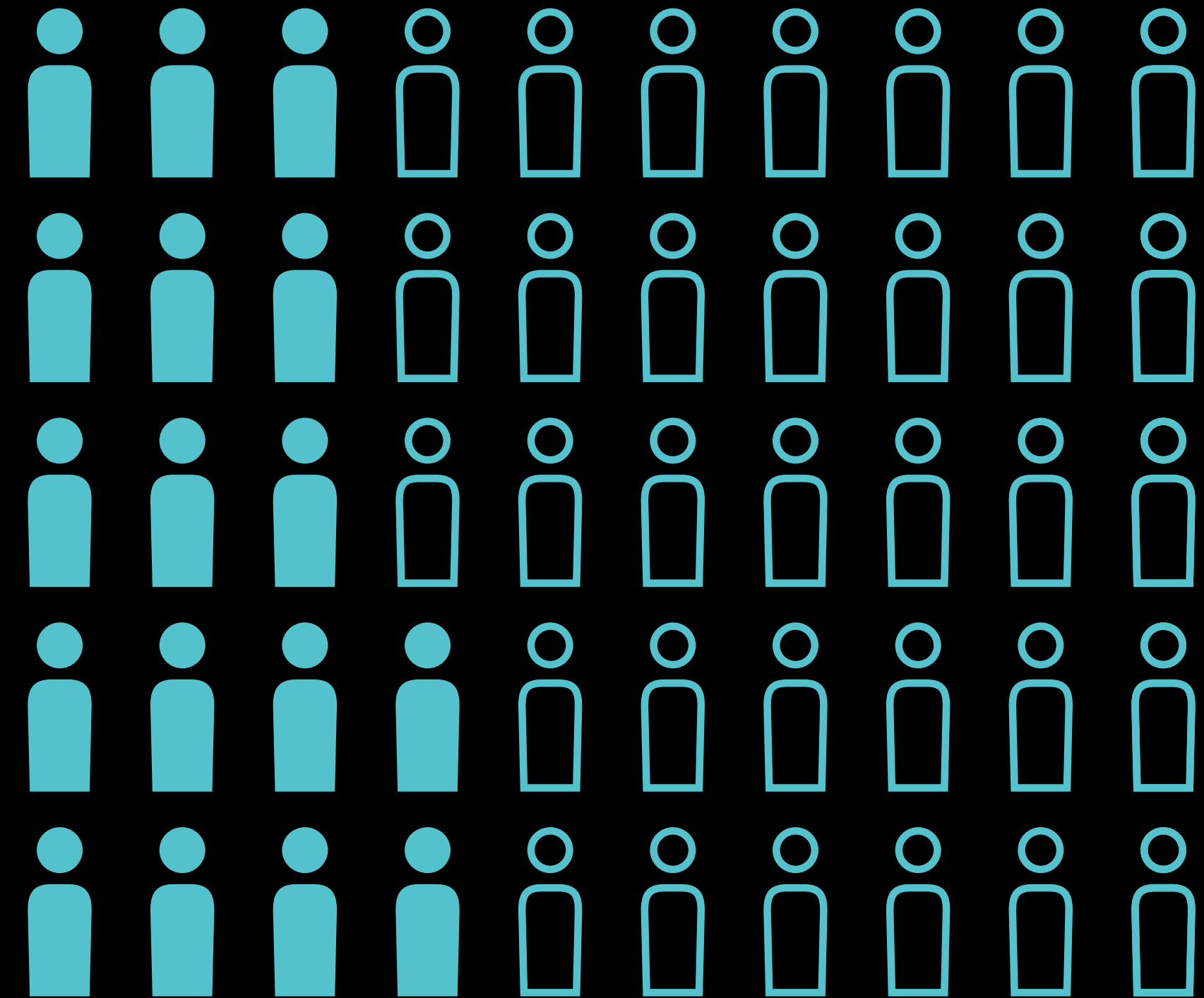
The core finding is simple: awards have impact when they are intentional. Intentional awards add meaning, make recognition more memorable, and reinforce what great work looks like.

"Whether it is a piece of paper that's framed in a \$5 frame or it's a beautiful piece of crystal, having something tangible is really important. It's validation that this is not something that you made up in your head. You've been recognized."

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

## What intentional recognition and awards look like

Intentional recognition feels sincere. It is delivered in a way the recipient prefers, and it reflects real knowledge of the person and the work. That requires leaders to understand recognition preferences, not guess.



**34% OF EMPLOYEES BELIEVE THEIR LEADERS DON'T KNOW HOW THEY WANT TO BE RECOGNIZED**

WHEN EMPLOYEES BELIEVE THEIR LEADERS DON'T UNDERSTAND THEIR RECOGNITION PREFERENCES, THERE ARE:

89%

DECREASED  
ODDS OF  
THRIVING AT  
WORK

82%

DECREASED  
ODDS OF DOING  
GREAT WORK

81%

DECREASED  
ODDS OF BEING  
ORGANIZATIONAL  
PROMOTERS

"Ask people what would be meaningful to them. When you work for a big company, a lot of times they don't bother to ask the people doing the day-to-day stuff: what is important to you? What is meaningful to you? Asking instead of just doing would be a nice gesture."

—ANALYST, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

## **Intentional recognition and awards...**

- Feel personal and sincere**
- Are presented to the recipient in the way they prefer**
- Make employees feel appreciated**

Employee recognition works best when it's personalized and shows real thought: how the recipient prefers to be recognized and what would make the moment feel meaningful, whether it's a note, eCard, points, symbolic award, or a personal gift. Intentional recognition signals that leaders took the time to understand the person and the work. It reinforces the mutual exchange at the center of recognition: employees give effort and great work, and the organization returns appreciation in a way that feels genuine.

Choice can be intentional too, when it is designed. A catalogue can either feel like a retailer's checkout page or a recognition experience. Curated options that reflect employees' lives, match the scale of the accomplishment, and include meaningful variety, from unique experiences to everyday essentials, communicate care and fit rather than transaction.

Intentional awards also clarify the story. The best awards make it easy to remember what happened and why it mattered. Symbolic awards do this especially well, linking achievement to shared standards and reinforcing what great work looks like here.

"I would say just be mindful of what you're sending. Think about it, if it's not something you'd appreciate, I probably won't appreciate it either. At least be mindful of what it would mean."

—SOCIAL WORKER, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

## The impact of intentional recognition

When leaders and peers carefully craft a personal, meaningful recognition moment with a thoughtful award, that award becomes a powerful symbol of the achievement and the recognition.

When intentional awards are given, employees are more likely to feel the award represented the accomplishment, remember the recognition, and feel their overall experience was meaningful. Organizations that leverage intentional recognition and awards have a powerful storytelling tool that reminds employees of the great work being done for years to come.

WHEN  
RECOGNITION  
IS INTENTIONAL,  
EMPLOYEES  
ARE:

8x

More likely to feel the  
award reminds them of  
the accomplishment

7x

More likely to feel  
the award enhanced  
the meaning of the  
recognition experience

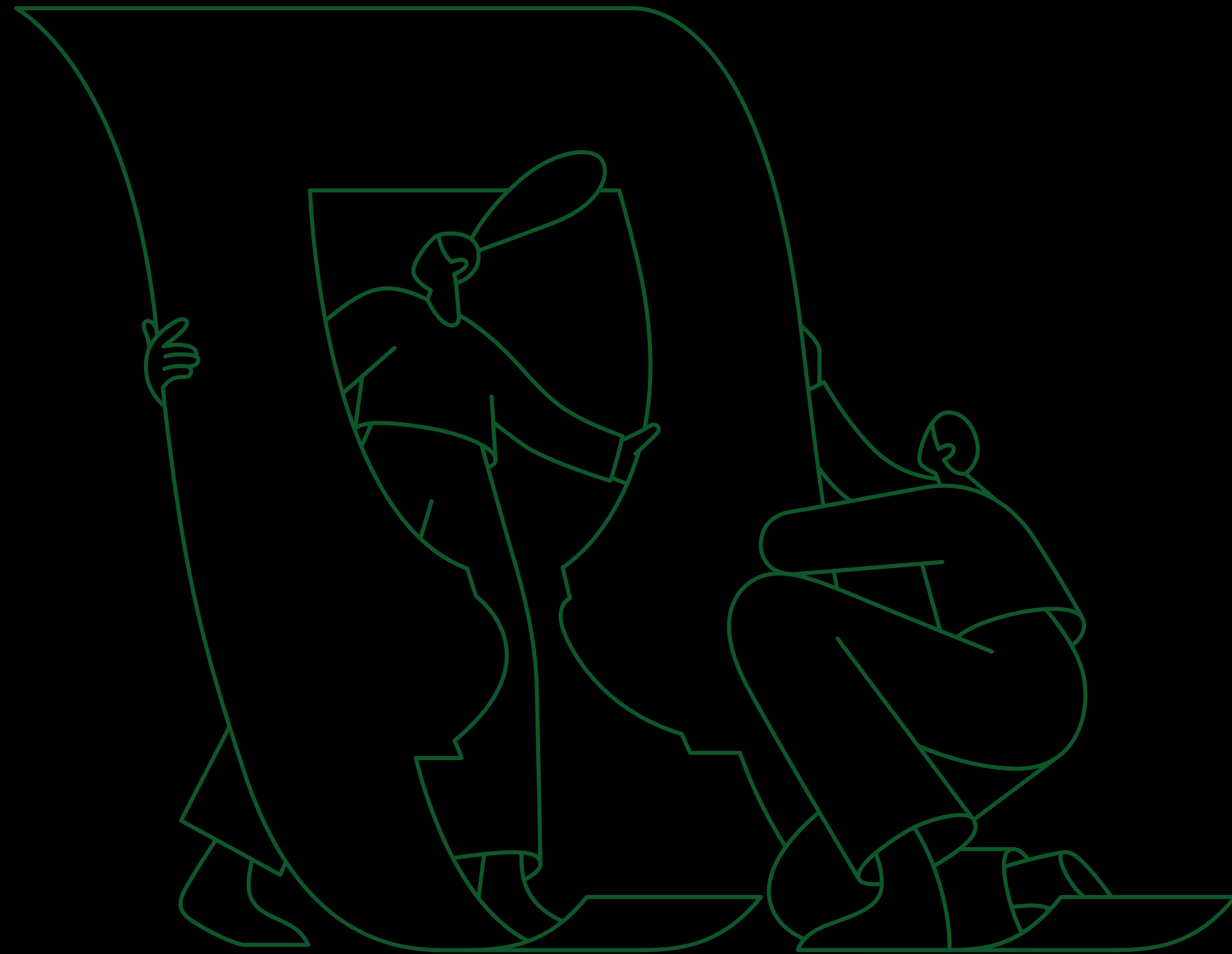
5x

More likely to feel  
the award clearly  
represented the  
accomplishment

Intentional awards also lead to tangible business outcomes:

	INCREASED ODDS WHEN RECOGNITION AND AWARDS ARE INTENTIONAL
I am personally invested in helping the organization succeed	10x
Employees have a high level of trust in the organization	8x
Employee recognition has helped build community at my work	8x
The recognition that I receive from my leader at work is meaningful to me	7x
The recognition that I receive from my team members at work is meaningful to me	7x
I would recommend my organization to a friend as a good place to work	6x
There is a high level of trust among the members of my team	4x

Employees are also 7x more likely to be a Promoter and 11x more likely to want to stay with the organization when recognition is intentional.



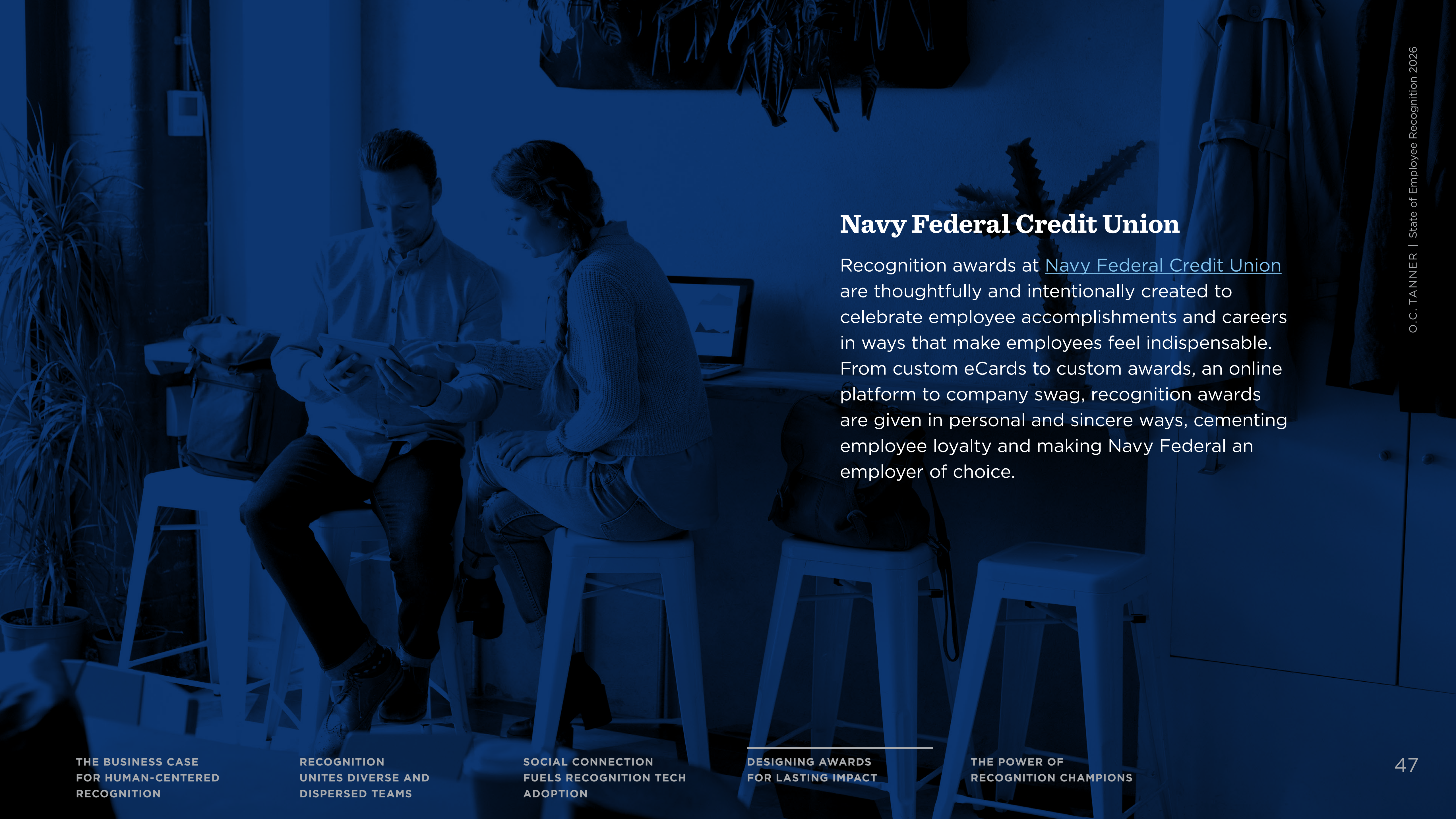
## RECOMMENDATIONS

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**Train leaders to understand employees' recognition preferences and how they want to be recognized**

**Thoughtfully design your award strategy, whether you are providing points to select an award, custom awards, or a curated award**

**Create an experience around giving awards, with a meaningful presentation that details specific accomplishments and connects recognition to company purpose and values**



## Navy Federal Credit Union

Recognition awards at [Navy Federal Credit Union](#) are thoughtfully and intentionally created to celebrate employee accomplishments and careers in ways that make employees feel indispensable. From custom eCards to custom awards, an online platform to company swag, recognition awards are given in personal and sincere ways, cementing employee loyalty and making Navy Federal an employer of choice.

# The Power of Recognition Champions



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THE POWER OF  
RECOGNITION CHAMPIONS

Recognition programs don't succeed on tools and awards alone. They succeed when recognition becomes normal behavior, modeled consistently and reinforced socially. That is where recognition champions come into play. Champions turn recognition from a program employees might know about into a practice employees see, learn, use, and repeat.

Recognition champions are employees or leaders who advocate for, promote, model, and support recognition in ways that strengthen workplace relationships. Think of them as a special culture squad within your organization. Their visible participation makes recognition feel safer to try, easier to learn, and more worth doing.

Not every organization invests in champions, but the data shows they are a practical lever for improving recognition adoption and outcomes.

The use of recognition champions varies by industry. Those that have the highest rate of champion programs are in traditional corporate, knowledge-worker sectors like engineering and IT, Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate. The lowest? Those primarily populated with front-line workers: Healthcare, Retail, and Hospitality (even though they often need champions the most).



**41% OF EMPLOYEES SAY THEIR ORGANIZATION HAS A RECOGNITION CHAMPION PROGRAM**

"People who have a passion and enthusiasm about something, if they're good at conveying that, they will inspire you to become a part of it. There has to be a genuine passion and enthusiasm that will then inspire you to say, I'm going to check this out."

—EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

## What makes a great recognition champion?

Nobody makes a better champion than a trusted colleague. Employees respond to champions who feel authentic, approachable, and genuinely committed to recognition as part of everyday work.

The top five qualities associated with an effective champion are:

- Authenticity
- Good communication skills
- Knowledge
- Being supportive
- Approachability

About 70% of champions are in their roles for less than a year and interact with employees through email or team meetings about once a month.

**Effective champions not only promote the practice of recognition but also play a key role in transforming how employees perceive the value of recognition.**

Recognition champions are effective conduits of recognition who strengthen social ties by sharing their experiences and build relationships with their peers. They have pre-existing social capital, and their feedback and experiences influence how their peers will perceive recognition. Surveyed employees view champions as a positive addition to their recognition programs and workplace culture.

**EMPLOYEES WHOSE ORGANIZATION HAS A RECOGNITION CHAMPION PROGRAM FIND:**

**It is effective overall**

**88%**

**It helps foster a healthy workplace culture**

**71%**

**Champions play an important role in launching and sustaining their company's recognition program**

**64%**

**82%**

**of those with champion programs would recommend expanding the program in the future**

**60%**

**of those without one would recommend adding one**

## Champions impact how employees recognize, connect, and perform

Champions make recognition social in a practical way. Employees see recognition modeled by someone they trust, learn what good recognition looks like, and then participate more consistently. That participation strengthens relationships, reinforces culture, and produces tangible ROI.

Champions, as expected, have an impact on how employees recognize one another at work:

- 2x** more likely to give recognition in the past 30 days
- 3x** more likely to regularly recognize
- 3x** more likely to regularly see someone receiving recognition

Even the presence of recognition champions has an impact on the perception that recognition helps build relationships:

- 3x** more likely to say recognition builds community
- 3x** more likely to say recognition encourages collaboration
- 3x** higher engagement
- 4x** more likely to say recognition helped them grow in their career

Champions have a marked impact on business outcomes:

- 4x** higher odds of innovation
- 3x** higher odds of retention
- 3x** higher odds of great work
- 2x** higher odds of promoting the organization

"It's just nice to have recognition champions there supporting you, walking you through everything, and making you feel like you're not totally lost."

—SUPPLY CHAIN, FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



## RECOMMENDATIONS

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**Leverage recognition champions to educate others on the benefits of recognition**

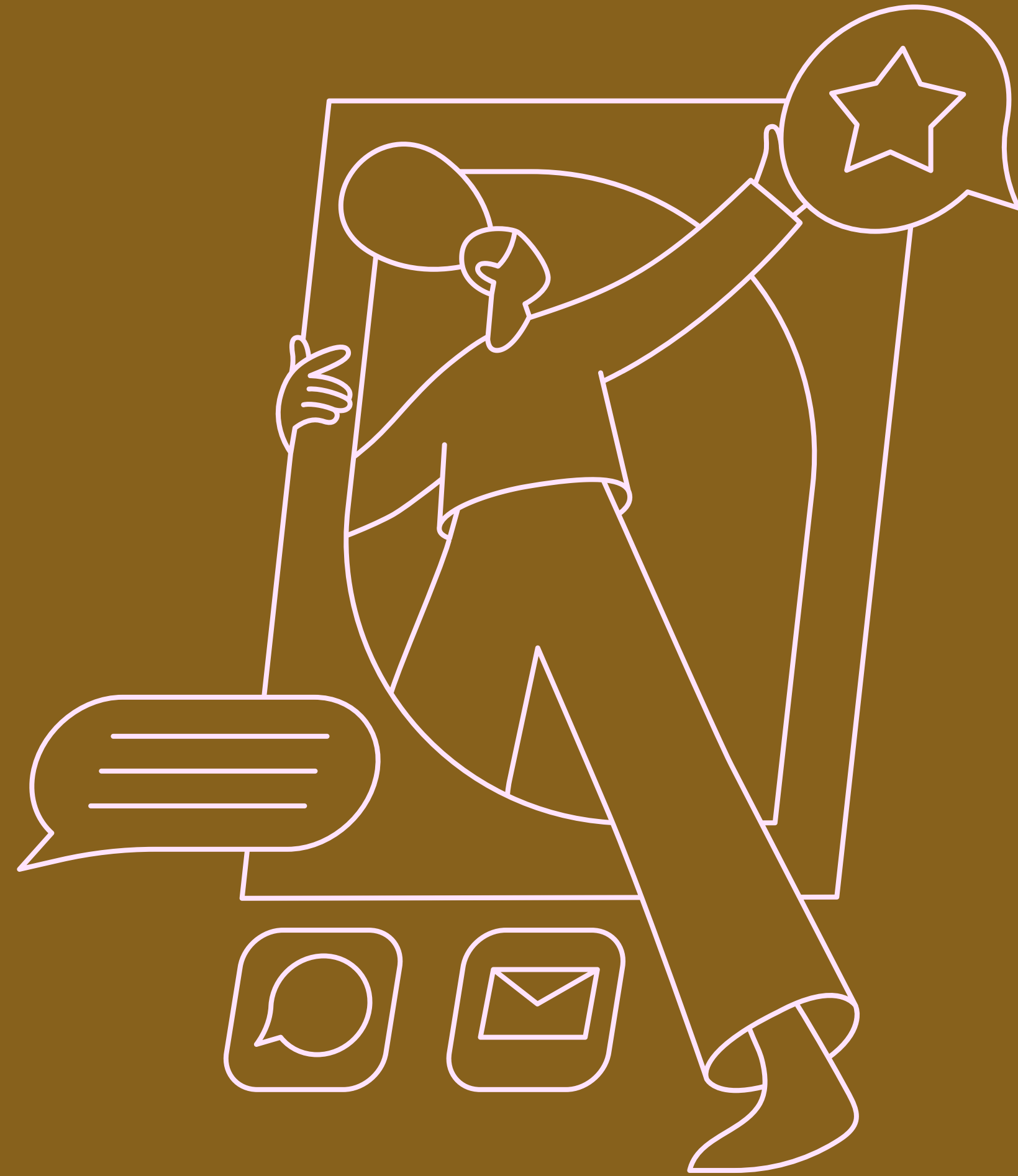
**Choose champions who are trusted, authentic, and communicate well**

**Equip champions with the tools and support they need to avoid burnout**

## One Last Word

High-performing cultures are built in the day-to-day. They are sustained by teams who trust each other, feel seen, and stay connected to what great work looks like. Meaningful recognition strengthens that foundation. It builds community, belonging, and inclusion that employees seek, and in turn fuels outcomes like innovation, retention, and productivity.

But recognition technology and awards, without a lived culture of appreciation, rarely reach their potential return. Transactional, one-size-fits-all recognition can create activity without creating relationships. The strongest results show up when employees feel real investment through authentic connection, growth, and appreciation. That is when people bring more energy, ownership, and commitment.



## Applying This Report's Insights

If you're ready to put these insights into practice, here are the capabilities to look for in a recognition partner and platform. Culture Cloud® is built to support each of these strategies.

### The Business Case for Human-Centered Recognition

Skip generic, transactional recognition and instead, create meaningful recognition experiences that strengthen connection and community at work. Frequent, personal, and integrated recognition is easy with [Culture Cloud®](#). In-app education, Recognition Coach writing assistance, and social tools enable anyone and everyone to give authentic recognition that strengthens workplace bonds.

### Recognition Unites Diverse and Dispersed Teams

Teams thrive on regular recognition that fosters belonging and inclusion. Culture Cloud facilitates the daily practice of appreciation on teams with multiple [peer-to-peer](#) and [team recognition](#) tools like Initiatives, which allows teams to customize recognition to meet their specific, unique goals. Features like [Post a Win, Broadcast, and Boost](#) drive greater connection and amplify the positive effects of recognition, so everyone feels appreciated and connected, no matter where they work.

### Social Connection Fuels Recognition Tech Adoption

Adoption is social. Make sure your recognition platform provides [mobile access](#), support for [offline workers](#), and [integrations](#) into the systems employees already use. Pair that with visible recognition moments that create social proof like a social wall to keep participation steady after launch.

## Designing Awards for Lasting Impact

Intentional recognition includes giving thoughtful awards that matter, not just gift cards or unlimited Amazon products. Show employees that you see them and honor their preferences with a carefully curated [award store](#) and thoughtfully designed [custom awards](#) as part of your recognition strategy. Custom awards are intentionally designed with your culture and employees in mind, making recognition personal and memorable with unique symbols that tie employee accomplishments to what matters most in your organization.

## The Power of Recognition Champions

Don't just launch a recognition program—activate it with recognition champions who bring your recognition strategy to life. With help from [Culture Consultants](#), select and engage champions who can accelerate adoption, alignment, and long-term impact.

## Choose the right partner

Work with a recognition provider who goes beyond just implementing a platform and delivering awards. Partner with someone who will help you build a lasting recognition culture that strengthens connection, improves tenure, and supports high performance.

At [O.C. Tanner](#), we look forward to being a true partner through our unique Culture by Design approach. To learn more about the difference we can make together, please [contact us](#).

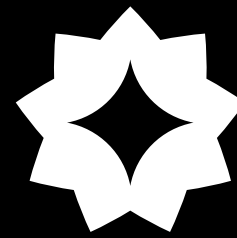
## Notes on Methodology

O.C. Tanner Institute Research used multiple research methods to support the 2026 State of Employee Recognition Report, including focus group interviews and cross-sectional surveys.

The qualitative findings are based on 9 U.S.-based focus groups with employees, leaders, and HR professionals conducted in the fall of 2025. Employees represented a range of employers and industries (including both public and private firms).

The quantitative findings are from an online survey distributed in the winter of 2025. The total sample size of 4,243 is comprised of employees working at organizations with 500+ employees in Australia, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The O.C. Tanner Institute collected and analyzed all survey data. This sample is sufficient to generate meaningful conclusions about the cultures of organizations in the included countries. However, because the study does not include population data, results are subject to statistical errors customarily associated with sample-based information. All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from the O.C. Tanner Institute.



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