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4 Ways to Adapt Employee Recognition Programs to the Virtual Workplace

Having remote workers on staff is transforming how companies recognize and reward their employees' accomplishments.

By Lisa Rabasca Roepe

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In the new virtual workspace, gathering staff in a conference room to recognize a colleague for a job well done with a certificate or a free lunch has become obsolete. Just as many other aspects of the workplace have changed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, so too have the ways employers recognize remote staff for their professional achievements.

The frequency of such recognition has also changed. Rather than recognizing team members once a quarter during all-hands meetings or at the end of the year, some companies are increasingly using platforms such as Slack and Instagram to reward employees more frequently for their good work.

"We actually feel that we celebrate our employees more now than ever before since becoming increasingly virtual," says Rachel Burnham, director of marketing and client experience at SurfCT, a dental information technology company based in New York City.

Companies are also focused on personalizing employee recognition. "It's easy to put a box of chocolate on someone's desk when you are in person," says Parul Kapoor, senior vice president of talent and culture at Calix, a San Jose, Calif.-based cloud and software company that provides broadband service in rural areas. "But to recognize someone in a virtual environment, you really have to know them."

Pre-pandemic, employee recognition was often part of in-office all-hands meetings where companies acknowledged employees in front of their peers with tangible rewards such as plaques, gift cards or other recognition gifts, says Leslie Tarnacki, SHRM-SCP, CHRO of WorkForce Software, a technology and software company in Livonia, Michigan. "Now, it's about leveraging technology and the tools available to gather everyone together while adding personal touches and sharing firsthand examples of success," she says.

This shift to personalized employee recognition started before the dawn of the pandemic, as more Millennials and Generation Z employees entered the workforce, says Tiffany Keenan, director of people operations at Veyl Ventures, a New York City-based health and wellness company. Younger workers perceive employment as a mutual relationship, Keenan says, and they expect their employers to support them. "It's a positive change because it makes employers think about their employees as a person," she adds, "and it creates an environment where employees don't feel like they're just another number."

Here are four ways managers can ensure employee recognition programs continue to be effective now that the employee experience is increasingly virtual.

1. Leverage social media and digital tools.

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As free food is a time-honored way of rewarding employees in the office, some employers are using technology to extend those perks to their remote workers. When Synchrony, a financial services firm based in Stamford, Conn., offers free lunches to its office staff, it also provides remote employees meals through food delivery services and restaurant gift cards. Teams are encouraged to eat together virtually.

Likewise, when SurfCT recently offered its onsite staff a free lunch on employee appreciation day, remote workers were encouraged to order lunch through UberEats or Grubhub using their company credit card. Similarly, the company sent digital Starbucks gift cards to all their employees to reward them for 100 percent participation in a companywide survey. Many team members shared photos of themselves enjoying their coffee on social media.

2. Customize your rewards.

Rather than recognizing workers with a plaque or certificate, many companies are allowing employees to choose their reward. "One of the trends we're noticing is managers adopting a more customized digital experience where employees have the option to curate their gift digitally—for example, choosing a preferred coffee or tea—and then have them sent to their homes," says Aaron Brown, senior vice president of total rewards at Synchrony.

Tarnacki says she has heard of other companies sending employees who receive awards an invitation to a website that offers a variety of treats so employees can pick what they'd like to receive. This adds a personal touch to the employee recognition experience.

Calix expects managers to surprise their employees with customized awards. Since the pandemic began, managers have been given \$125 every quarter to spend on each employee to recognize their work. "We encourage managers not to give gift cards because that's too impersonal," Kapoor says. Instead, managers are expected to find out what employees and their families like to do together and base the reward on that interest.

For example, one of Kapoor's team members likes to play golf with his wife. So to reward him for a job well done, Kapoor booked them a tee time and lunch at a local golf course. When another employee moved into his first home, Kapoor gave him a grill. "The intent is to create better bonds between manager and employees," she says.

3. Encourage peer recognition.

Employee recognition shouldn't only come from managers. Colleagues can also provide recognition, especially at companies with internal Slack channels or message boards. "Sometimes our best recognition comes from our own team members recognizing other team members," Burnham says.

Celebrating individual and team success through an internal social media platform such as Slack can be very powerful, Keenan says, adding that it's important for managers to facilitate and encourage peer-to-peer recognition.

4. Ask your employees what they want.

WorkForce Software regularly asks employees for feedback about the company's employee recognition program and how to make it better. "This shows our employees how valuable their input is for us in creating better experiences for them," Tarnacki says.

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MetV Ventures recently conducted coffee chats with employees to get their impression of the employee recognition program. "We take their feedback and try to create our programs around what they like to see and use," Burnham says.

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SurfCT often rewards teams with in-person celebrations. The team votes on the activity they'd like to do, and they can provide alternative ideas if they don't like any of the suggested options. The company's leadership recently wanted to host a team dinner, Vigario says, but most employees said they'd prefer going to Dave and Busters, so the team did that instead.

"Having a voice in how to be rewarded allows the team to be seen and heard," Burnham says. "It matters knowing how a team prefers to be recognized."

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