bucketlist

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The Recognition Gap:

Why Good Work Goes Unnoticed and How HR Can Solve It

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A research brief for attendees of the panel, with the findings and the tools discussed.

WHY RECOGNITION CAN MOTIVATE

Help people see what mattered and why

Recognition does its work when it tells someone three things: their contribution was noticed, why it mattered, and that it is worth repeating. How often recognition happens creates opportunities for that experience. Its quality shapes whether it feels meaningful and credible. Fairness makes people feel seen.

THREE THINGS A PERSON NEEDS TO FEEL

Capable

"I did this well."

Someone saw the work and named what was good about it.

Connected

"It mattered to someone."

The work reached a colleague, a customer or the team, and they noticed.

Free to choose

"I would do it again."

Nobody forced it. Pressure or a quota would undo the first two.

ONE MOMENT OF RECOGNITION

Contribution noticed → Meaning understood → Willingness to repeat → Observable behavior

TRY THIS

Give recognition people can understand and repeat

1 **Name the contribution**
Describe what the person actually did.

2 **Explain why it mattered**
Connect it to a colleague, customer, team or useful outcome.

3 **Make it personal and believable**
Say what you genuinely appreciated.

4 **Choose the moment and delivery**
Recognize while the contribution is still relevant, and consider public or private preferences.

AN ADAPTABLE MESSAGE STRUCTURE

I noticed [specific contribution]. It helped [person or outcome] because [why it mattered]. I appreciated [personal observation].

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE

"You spotted the issue before we sent the order and helped the team correct it. That saved the customer an avoidable delay. Thank you for paying attention and speaking up."

Recognize contributions people can understand and repeat.

Make noticing a regular part of work

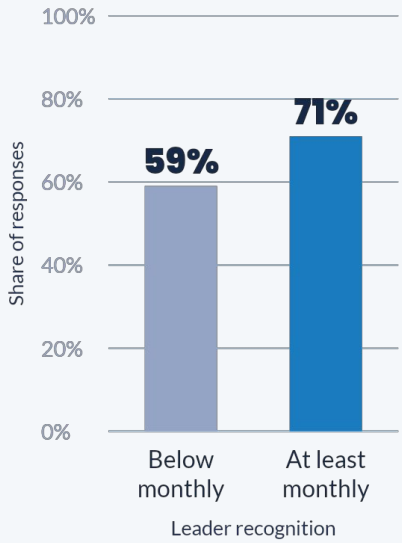
Our research compared people who receive recognition from a leader less than monthly with people who receive it at least monthly. On each of the three outcomes below, the at-least-monthly group did better. Recognition frequency acts as the foundation that supports great cultures.

54% report leader recognition less than monthly
1,713 of 3,165 responses

45% report peer recognition less than monthly
1,440 of 3,165 responses

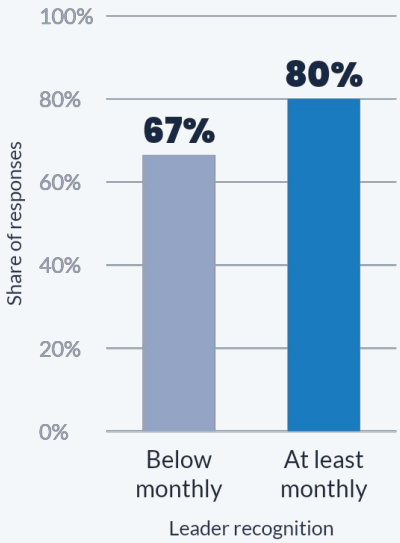
Engagement

Feeling energized and proud about their work.



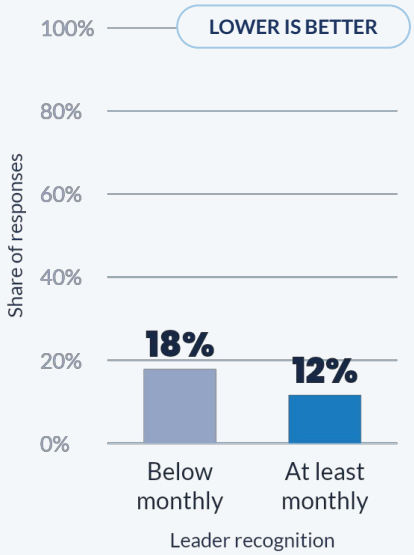
Satisfaction

Satisfied with the company as a place to work



Turnover intention

Regularly considered leaving in the past year



Below monthly includes people who never receive recognition.

TRY THIS

Make noticing part of work already happening

Before an existing team meeting or check-in:

1. Recall one useful contribution.
2. Explain what happened and why it mattered.
3. Consider whose work you may not have seen.

A CONVERSATION STARTER

"What have you worked on recently that I might not have seen?"

QUALITY, NOT JUST QUANTITY

High-quality recognition changes how people feel about work

High quality means people agree the recognition they receive is genuine, timely, personalized and fair. Low quality means they did not.

Engagement

Feeling energized and proud about their work.



Satisfaction

Satisfied with the company as a place to work



Turnover intention

Regularly considered leaving in the past year



Frequent and high-quality recognition is a game-changer.

EACH QUALITY ON ITS OWN

Share who meet each outcome, among people who did not agree with the statement and among people who did.

	Engagement		Satisfaction		Considered leaving (lower is better)	
	Did not agree	Agree	Did not agree	Agree	Did not agree	Agree
Genuine	44%	71%	33%	82%	35%	11%
Timely	51%	70%	44%	82%	29%	11%
Personalized	53%	73%	50%	84%	25%	10%
Fair	56%	75%	56%	87%	23%	9%

TRY THIS

Check a message against the four qualities

1 **Genuine**
Did you say what the person actually did, and mean it?

2 **Timely**
Did it arrive within the week?

3 **Personalized**
Is this how they like to be recognized?

4 **Fair**
Would similar work by someone else get the same recognition?

WHO GETS RECOGNIZED, AND WHO GETS MISSED

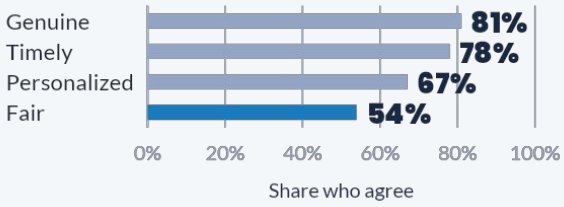
Recognize similar contributions equally, whoever makes them

54%

Only 54% agree that recognition is distributed fairly among employees

Fairness means similar contributions get similar recognition, whoever makes them. When that holds, people feel seen. Providing fair recognition is seen as the biggest challenge facing organizations in terms of recognition. Below are some tips on how to use AI to help.

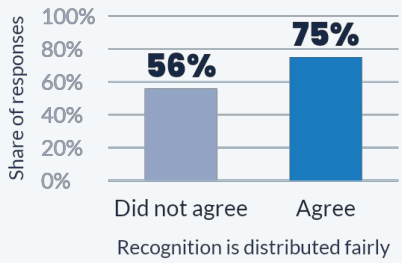
Agree with each quality statement



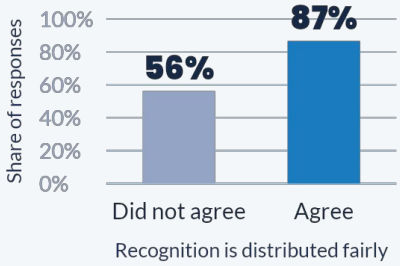
FAIRNESS ON ITS OWN

People who agree that recognition is distributed fairly, compared with people who did not.

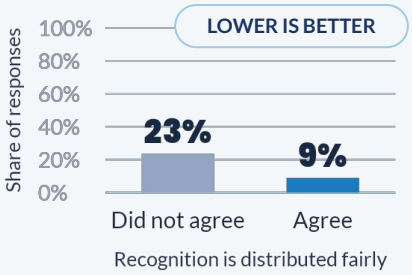
Engagement



Satisfaction



Turnover intention



GOOD WORK IS NOT ALWAYS THE MOST VISIBLE WORK

- **Helping a colleague learn the job**
- **Preventing an error before it lands**
- **Working remotely or on another shift**
- **Quiet support work behind a result**

Similar work gets unequal recognition when some of it is harder to see. Two things help: clear criteria for what deserves recognition, and more chances to notice it.

TRY THIS

A fairness check

"Would the same contribution get the same recognition on another team, shift or location?"

A PROPOSED WORKFLOW TO TEST: USE AI TO HELP GOOD WORK GET NOTICED

Nominations and work records → AI flags who may be missed → A person checks and adds context → The employee receives it

AI could organize peer nominations, prompt managers, flag coverage gaps and draft messages from verified information. People add personal meaning and choose the delivery. Used this way, AI widens who gets noticed: it surfaces contributions from the teams, shifts and roles a manager rarely sees, reminds leaders when someone has gone unrecognized for a while, and gives similar contributions the same chance of a timely message. More contributions get noticed, and each message still comes from a person.

THE BUSINESS CASE

Recognition shows up in the numbers leaders already track

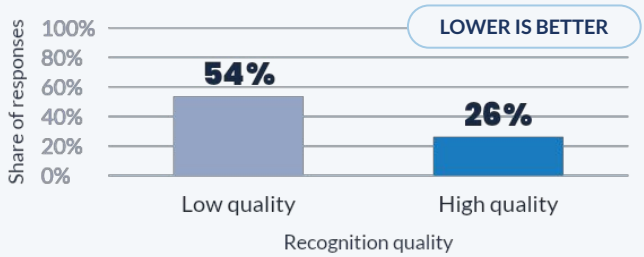
Recognition is often framed as a morale tool. In our research it also tracks with the outcomes leadership watches: high-quality recognition goes with less burnout and stress, and people who use a recognition platform at least monthly do better on engagement, satisfaction and intent to leave.

BURNOUT AND STRESS, BY RECOGNITION QUALITY

People who agree their recognition is genuine, timely, personalized and fair, compared with people who did not. Share who regularly or more often feel drained or stressed.

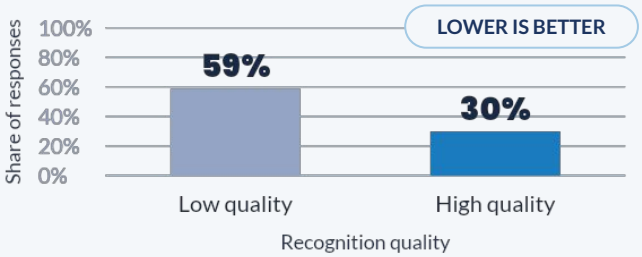
Burnout

Regularly feel emotionally drained from their work



Stress

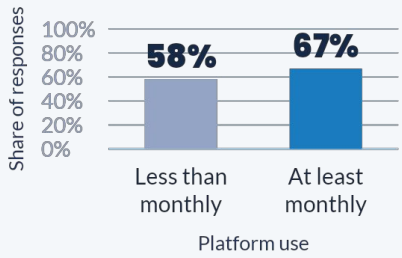
Regularly feel stressed at work



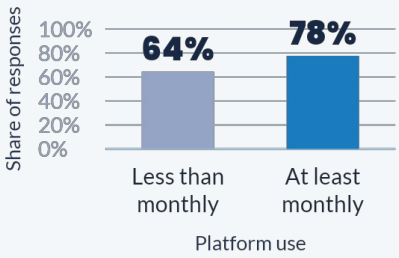
TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED RECOGNITION

People who use their recognition platform at least about once a month, compared with people who use it less than monthly or never.

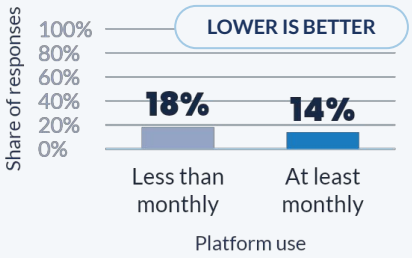
Engagement



Satisfaction



Turnover intention



USE THIS WITH YOUR LEADERS

Bring three numbers to the conversation

How many hear from a leader less than monthly → One outcome you already track → One behavior you want more of

Start from your own recognition feed and the records HR already keeps: retention, absence, quality. Pair one recognition number with one outcome, team by team, and let the comparison make the case. Recognition that names a behavior is the easiest to connect to a result.

MEASURE WHAT CHANGES

Track recognition, then link it to the numbers you keep

Tracking recognition matters: it is how an organization learns whether its program changes anything or only runs. Most already have the three numbers this page brings together: the recognition feed, the counts from the work, and the records in HR and operations. The cards below show what to track, what should move first, and what should move later. A recommended short pulse is also included.

RECOGNITION · FROM THE FEED

What you track

Who was recognized, by whom, for what, and how soon. Coverage by team and shift. The share that names the behavior you chose.

BEHAVIOR · FROM THE WORK

What it should move first

One count, week by week: concerns raised, near misses reported, new starters signed off, follow-ups closed.

RESULTS · FROM THE RECORDS

What it should move later

Retention, absence, incidents, quality, from HR and operations. Quarter by quarter, with a lag.

IF YOU ALSO WANT TO KNOW HOW IT FELT: A SHORT PULSE

Ask before the change and again after. Keep the wording and the response options the same.

SIX CORE QUESTIONS

1. In the past four weeks, how often have you received recognition from your manager or leader for your work?
   Never · Once · Two or three times · About once a week · Several times a week
2. The recognition I receive feels genuine.
3. Recognition arrives soon enough to connect it with the contribution being recognized.
4. The way I am recognized fits my personal preferences.
5. At work, recognition is distributed fairly among employees.
6. The recognition I receive makes me want to repeat the contributions being recognized.

Questions 2 to 6 use a seven-point scale: Strongly disagree · Disagree · Somewhat disagree · Neither agree nor disagree · Somewhat agree · Agree · Strongly agree.

TWO OPTIONAL OUTCOME QUESTIONS

7. How satisfied are you with your company as a place to work?
   Very dissatisfied · Dissatisfied · Somewhat dissatisfied · Neutral · Somewhat satisfied · Satisfied · Very satisfied
8. During the past three months, how often have you seriously considered leaving your organization?
   Never · Almost never · Rarely · Occasionally · Regularly · Often · Very often

THREE THINGS TO TAKE BACK

Notice contributions.
Make them matter.
Recognize them fairly.

ONE PRACTICAL NEXT STEP

"Pick one contribution worth repeating, say what you saw and why it mattered, check who you missed, and test it in one team before you scale it."

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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