



AS TELEWORKING BOOMS, RECOGNITION KEEPS EMPLOYEES CONNECTED

By Cord Himmelstein, HALO Recognition



Engagement and recognition programs have become key tools for keeping connected with teleworkers.

Hierarchies are disappearing more quickly than employees are hopping jobs during these fast times, and remote work, sometimes called telework, is at the center of this change. The latest data from Global Workplace Analytics reports many Fortune 1000 companies are revamping their workplace strategies around the fact that employees are going remote. Fifty percent of the U.S. workforce now has a job that is compatible with at least partial telework, and about 20% to 25% of the U.S. workforce teleworks with some frequency. A whopping 80% to 90% of employees say they would like to telework at least part time, and a total of 3.7 million of them do.

THE TALE OF THE TAPE

is that employers must prepare to work in newer and more unfamiliar ways as they move into the future.

Concerns About Remote Work Linger

Debate remains about the benefits, or lack thereof, of fielding a remote workforce. Companies like IBM and Yahoo recently ended all remote work and compelled staffers to migrate back to company offices. This could be a huge mistake. The influence of remote work on employee happiness and morale is undeniable. A gigantic cohort of workers out there is unnecessarily tied to offices, and their lives and well-being could be improved instantly by a bit more autonomy and by less time lost to commuting. Anyone who tells you differently is simply not paying enough attention.

Concerns about productivity are not without merit, however. The other edge of the telework sword is that it takes more than happiness and morale to get things done. It also takes teamwork, coordination, motivation and a genuine connection with the work, and therein lies the root of the problem. The question arises: How do we know when it's time to work when there's no longer a workplace to show up to? To be stuck on that question is to not see the forest for the trees. Everyone wants to work and be productive daily, but nobody can be productive without a purpose.

Moving Forward with Millennials

Millennials, the largest cohort in the workforce and those most likely to be teleworkers, have always advocated this approach and are beginning to break into management roles. They were raised on the Internet and social media and don't tend to see geographical distance as a hindrance to collaboration. The tale of the tape is that employers must prepare to work in newer and more unfamiliar ways as they move into the future.

The real question we face, therefore, is: How do employers maintain a daily human connection when our employees are no longer close to us? Is there some way we could make this remote-work thing work for everyone? Yes. Recognition programs have emerged as key tools for keeping that vital connection alive across long distances.

Organizations are heading toward more segmented, automated workforces in which many employees aren't in the office regularly. Recognition and performance management platforms are the primary tools for making personal connections, building trust and ultimately motivating employees to high performance.

The Evolution of Workplace Engagement

During the past few decades, rewards and recognition have morphed from straightforward, ad-hoc gift programs into centralized, enterprise-level systems fine-tuned to engage employees through more varied initiatives and multilayered reward offerings. For example, cloud-based software is used to reach employees anywhere and has the capability to help foster a positive common dialogue about high performance, the company's vision and standards of workplace gratitude.

Ways to Engage Remote Workers

Engagement strategies are adapting to the notion that a good percentage of a company's workforce will be working remote or mobile:

Personal relationships, not technology platforms, are driving engagement. Technology is easy to come by, making the act of recognizing achievements and treating employees tied more intimately to productivity and the bottom line than ever before. Google has been a leader in this field. Even though their mission focuses on making lives better through technology,

they have put equal if not more emphasis on positive, authentic work relationships as a key to success. Known for extravagant benefits, the company built their own engagement and management training think-tank called Project Oxygen, which values coaching experience, empathy, and relationship-building skills well above technical expertise in managers. “It’s less about the aspiration to be number one in the world,” Karen May said, Google vice president of people development, in a 2013 Fast Company interview, “and more that we want our employees and future employees to love it here, because that’s what’s going to make us successful.”

■ **Companywide celebrations, anniversaries and staff assemblies carry more significance.** Getting everyone together used to be as simple as sending a memo. But with remote work taking hold and personal relationships becoming the focus of engagement strategy, such events are turning into prime opportunities to get all employees face to face, build real connections and bond with each other — a commodity that will be harder to come by as workforces become more fractured. WorldatWork’s 2017 Recognition Trends survey data shows the top three presentation methods for employee recognition are one-on-one with a manager, at a special event or during a staff meeting. Additionally, presentations at companywide meetings are more popular than they’ve been during the past decade.

The bottom line: Informal communications and human connections are more important than ever. Telework scatters employees, diluting the reach of company messaging and making it less personal. When managers make a bigger effort to reach out with more human forms of communication, they engage teleworkers and their office-bound counterparts more effectively.

Ways to Reward, Motivate Remote Workers

These recognition tips and techniques are effective best practices for keeping a remote workforce feeling engaged, rewarded and motivated:

■ **Be mobile-ready.** The latest Pew Research analysis reports 64% of American adults own a smartphone, and 68% of smartphone users use them to follow breaking news

and community happenings and to share media. Whether workers are remote or co-located, it’s a mobile workforce, and all the features of your recognition platform should be available on all devices all the time.

■ **Provide social recognition.** Social media use among adults has seen a nearly tenfold increase in the last decade, so adding it as an element to your recognition program should

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VIDEO-CONFERENCE TOOLS LIKE SKYPE, HANGOUTS and avatar robots are becoming essential for getting remote employees face to face with management and staff, creating a virtual presence in the office.

be a no-brainer in the remote era. This is quick, effective engagement that moves instantly across locations and departments — make it a primary channel. Best-practice achievement platforms should offer the ability to personalize profiles, follow peers, post comments, and like posts from others, just like your favorite social networking site. In lieu of those features, there should at least be a formalized internal network for sharing congratulations and being social at work.

■ **Structure employee onboarding.** Structured onboarding helps alleviate engagement troughs in any employee's first year and increases the chances of employees staying beyond three years. If administered remotely with day-one onboarding kits, date and performance-driven milestones and strategic support from management, you can get teleworkers on board with your culture quickly without them having to set foot in the office.

■ **Consider self-reporting.** Self-reporting is a relatively new idea in employee recognition. Employees are given a checklist of accomplishments and goals, which they complete at their own pace, and they submit their completed tasks to human resources for approval and to receive rewards. This worked out very well for a major client of

ours in the energy sector. Their administrators were being stretched too thin keeping up with recognition goals among a widely scattered workforce, and they wanted to experiment with letting employees track their own progress on initiatives. The employees responded well to the extra empowerment and it turned into a great solution for keeping remote staff on track with performance goals without overburdening managers.

■ **Create a virtual presence.** Video-conference tools like Skype, Hangouts and avatar robots are becoming essential for getting remote employees face to face with management and staff, creating a virtual presence in the office. These tools also are perfect for recognizing remote workers in front of their peers during group meetings, keeping them connected and up front with their teammates.

■ **Send e-cards and digital notes.** They've been around since the beginning of the Internet and remain useful for making a quick "hello" or gesture of appreciation, doubly so for remote workers. Many, if not all, recognition platforms integrate digital appreciation in some way, and for good reason — they are an excellent, low-cost way to keep up daily engagement, and they give managers

a reliable tool for showing gratitude across distances.

Home Away from Home

No one knows what the workplace of the future will look like, but one thing for sure is that the telework genie is out of the bottle and there's no putting it back. Employers who can offer telework should support it with forward-thinking recognition and engagement schemes that eschew hierarchy, reach the widest possible audience via all available channels and connect with the desires to work with a purpose, grow as part of a community and have a home for our achievements — even if it's a virtual one. [WS](#)

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