

Recognition Intelligence Report

**What human data reveals
about work, culture,
and the modern workforce**



The workforce data you have is missing something.

Organizations can measure engagement, performance, retention, skills, productivity, and increasingly, AI adoption.

But some of the most important things about work remain difficult to see:

- What are people actually contributing?
- Which skills are showing up?
- How are people adapting?
- Which behaviors are helping teams succeed?

Every recognition moment creates human-authored data: an observation of what someone did, how they did it, or why it mattered. At scale, those observations can reveal patterns that conventional workforce data may miss.



Tapping into Human Intelligence

Human Intelligence™ is the insight that emerges when high-quality recognition data is analyzed at scale with AI and put into conversation with workforce and business data.

In our full study, we looked at how signals emerging from recognition can help illuminate key business questions – drawing from a trailing, 12-month, global Workhuman database of 21 million awards from 400+ companies. We also did a deep language analysis across 2.6 million recognition messages from 35 Workhuman customers across 7 industries.

Together, these analyses show that the people doing the work are one of the richest sources of information about it.

Read on for highlights of what we found.

Recognition creates an organizational footprint.

Recognition is a human moment. But across more than 21 million moments, it also creates a measurable record of how work moves through an organization. This year's research showed some broader patterns about how recognition moves.

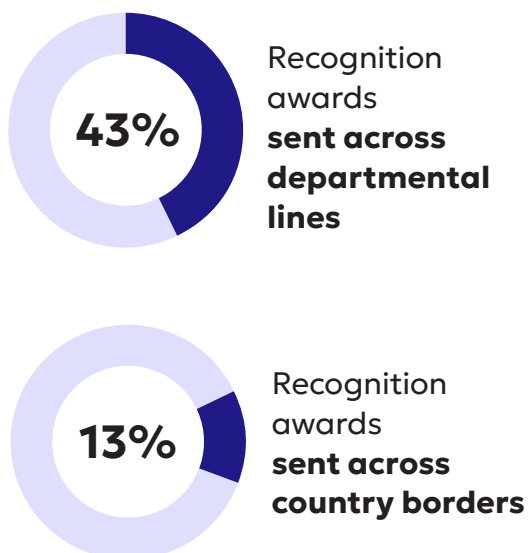
Recognition is distributed.

Managers are important catalysts, but recognition is far from a purely top-down activity.



Recognition crosses boundaries.

Recognition often makes contributions visible beyond the structures shown on an org chart.



The language changes with the work.

Across 7 industries, the vocabulary of recognition varies with the context – offering a view into what people value in different kinds of work. Here are the top 10 terms:

- 1 Ownership
- 2 Meaningful
- 3 Execution
- 4 Highly
- 5 Consistently
- 6 Proactively
- 7 Exactly
- 8 Clear
- 9 Clearly
- 10 Overall



3 signals are becoming more visible.

The language of recognition can reveal more than what people appreciate. By analyzing more than 2.6 million messages, we surfaced patterns in the conditions, behaviors, and priorities surrounding work. This year's research dives into 3 major themes.

1.

Psychological safety

When speaking up becomes visible

Psychological-safety-related language rose from approximately 9.8% to 11.1% of recognition messages between January 2025 and June 2026.

Recognition makes behaviors like asking questions, raising concerns, and surfacing risks visible.

2.

Wellbeing & burnout

When extraordinary effort becomes a pattern

Burnout-related language remained a persistent part of the recognition record, reaching approximately 17.2% in June 2026.

The question is not whether recognition can diagnose burnout. It can't.

It can, however, raise a useful question: When extraordinary effort becomes something people repeatedly recognize, what does it tell us about the system around that work?

3.

AI & digital transformation

From adoption to contribution

AI-related language increased from approximately 1.6% to 3.8%.

Recognition can show not simply whether people are using AI, but what they are doing with it – experimenting, solving problems, improving processes, and helping turn technology into something useful.



What else can recognition data reveal?

Recognition can provide a human view of work: what people are contributing, which behaviors are being noticed, and how priorities show up in everyday interactions. But its value grows when those observations relate to the workforce data organizations already use.

Skills in action

Roughly 4 in 5 recognition messages contain at least 1 identifiable skill.

The most frequently detected include:

- **Proactivity** – 42%
- **Supportiveness** – 38%
- **Collaboration** – 36%
- **Efficiency** – 26%
- **Leadership** – 24%

Notably, creativity and innovation was the least-recognized skill across every industry studied.

Business outcomes

Recognition can be analyzed alongside performance, retention, engagement, career development, wellbeing, and other workforce or business measures – helping organizations **investigate relationships they could not see in either dataset alone.**

Safe work

Recognition can **surface the proactive behaviors people notice in the moment** – identifying risks, stopping unsafe work, following safe practices, and speaking up.

That creates another lens on safety alongside incidents, near misses, compliance, and training.

Information quality

Not every recognition message carries the same amount of useful information.

A specific observation can capture what happened, how someone contributed, who else was involved, and why the work mattered.

The richer the observation, the more context there is to analyze.

What happens when recognition data meets workforce data?

Recognition becomes more powerful when it is analyzed alongside the workforce and business data an organization already has. See these examples and more in the [full report](#).



Performance ratings

Employees who were recognized more frequently were more likely to improve their performance ratings. Employees who both gave and received recognition were also more likely to improve.



Strategic alignment

Richer messages were associated with higher performance-improvement rates and clearer coaching opportunities, while the content reflected strategic priorities including AI, safety, and adaptability.



Psychological safety

Teams with high recognition activity scored 7.5 points higher on an internal psychological-safety survey compared to teams with no recognition activity. Recognition was also linked to stronger engagement and intent to stay.



Wellbeing & outcomes

By linking recognition with wellness program data, CCG is able to see how participation in both programs relates to broader workforce outcomes. With Workhuman iQ, they found that Wellness badge earners had lower voluntary turnover.



Retention & performance

More frequent recognition was associated with lower turnover, with the strongest retention relationship among hourly employees. Recognition was also associated with improved performance.



Recognition impact

First-year recognition data connected with performance, retention, and company values – demonstrating what a new recognition program can begin to reveal.

Recognition tells us more about our workforces.

Recognition shows us where appreciation is being expressed, and what values and behaviors employees choose to celebrate in their organizations. But it can also surface critical signals around skills, psychological safety, and overwork.

Strategic recognition adds something conventional workforce systems often struggle to capture: the perspective of the people experiencing the work. That perspective can make hidden patterns more visible – from the skills people use and the behaviors they reinforce to the ways work is changing and the conditions surrounding it.

The next generation of workforce intelligence will not come from collecting more data. **It will come from seeing more in the data you already have.**

Analysis draws on 2.62 million English-language recognition messages from 35 Workhuman customers across 7 industries, Jan. 2025 – June 2026. Additional analyses use customer-specific workforce data as noted in the report. Recognition-language analyses identify signals, not diagnoses or direct measures of underlying workforce conditions.

There's more to discover.

Download the full [Recognition Intelligence Report](#) to go deeper than we could go here – with additional findings, customer analyses, data, and examples of how recognition can illuminate the way work gets done.

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