River

A Blueprint for Employee Engagement

How to boost retention
and productivity through
social engagement

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How to boost retention and productivity through social engagement

For most people, a third of their lives are spent at work. But what that work life looks like is anything but uniform — the same goes for the level of productivity generated.

For some, work is just a payslip. For others, work provides focus, identity and purpose — becoming the cornerstone of their life. Ultimately, what sits on either side of this line is the difference between a 'job' and a 'career'.

In the modern, service-based, wage-based economy, the old standard of what made a career has faded. What has been left standing is how engaged people feel about their job. The importance of this to both employees and employers cannot be denied.

Organisations with high levels of employee engagement are 22% more profitable. 32% of employees would take a 10% pay cut for a job they're more interested in or passionate about. People who find meaning in their job are three times as likely to stay with that company.

87% of senior leaders surveyed think that disengagement is one of the three biggest threats facing their businesses, and they aren't wrong. In a workforce that's getting younger, more and more workers are favouring enjoying their work over a bigger paycheck.

If you want the best people, if you want to reduce the cost of high turnover, if you want to maximise productivity — you need to take employee engagement seriously.
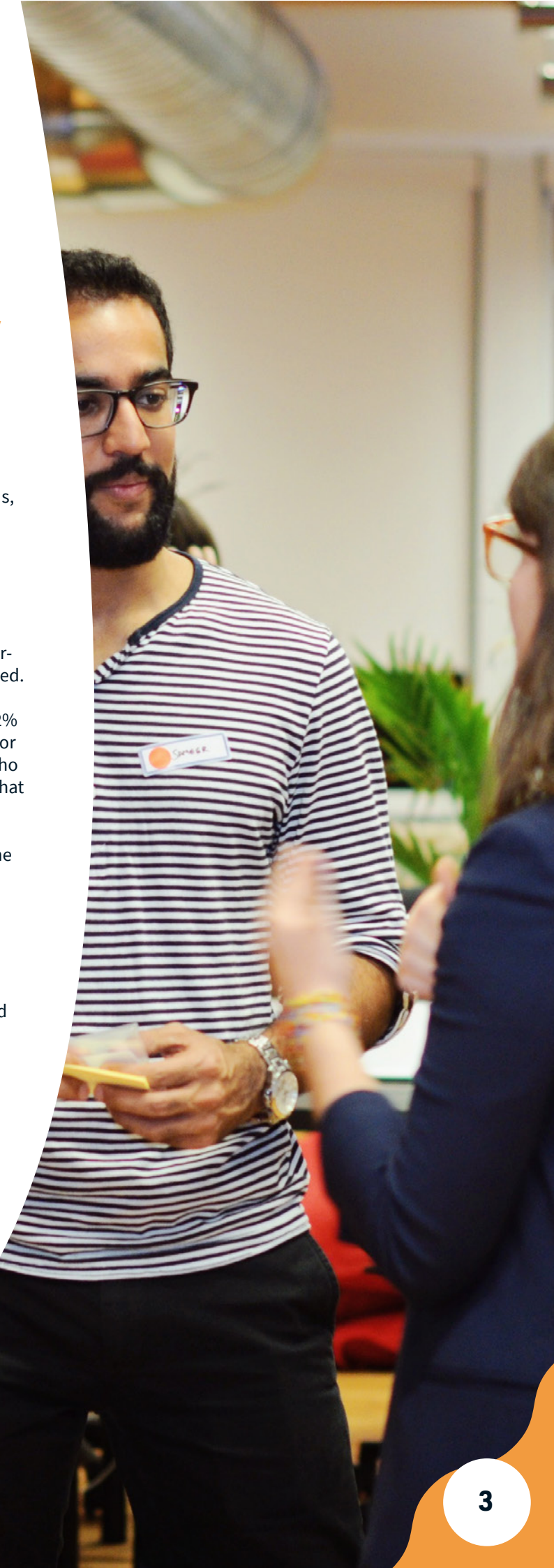
What should employers do?

Especially in large corporations, CEOs are happy to throw money at in-office indulgences such as a games room or unlimited snacks. While this may make employees feel happier about coming to work, it doesn't necessarily make them work harder — or feel engaged.

Doug Conant, former CEO of Campbell's Soup once said, "To win in the marketplace you must first win in the workplace". Without the right workforce in place, your company will struggle to profit.

Understanding how to create a highly motivated and engaged workforce isn't straightforward. The larger your operation, the more complex the problem. Unfortunately, it's all too easy for employee engagement programmes to fall by the wayside. In-house projects always lose out for attention when compared to delivering to clients. But if you don't have your own house in order, your long-term success will always be in question.

Improving employee engagement starts by identifying it as a priority. The simple fact that you are reading this eBook puts you on the right path. What we will deliver here is a structure that will allow you to think about what your business needs to improve in order to engage with employees and craft a better future today.

Fundamentally, a successful engagement programme relies on communication — communication with employees and communication with leadership. You need investment from the top and direction from below in order to build an engagement programme that will work, and create a culture able to sustain its growth.

It's our position that recognition, social recognition specifically, is the best tool at your disposal for creating a culture that engages employees for the long term. But before we can explain how that gets done, we need to be crystal clear on what we're talking about.

Defining employee engagement

'Employee engagement' has been bandied about for more than 30 years. But over the last decade, it's become a buzzword. That means it has lost a lot of its meaning.

Employee engagement often gets confused with 'employee happiness' or 'employee satisfaction'. But these aren't the same. An employee can be satisfied or happy without feeling engaged, but it's rare that an employee would feel engaged without feeling satisfied. The terms are linked, but they aren't the same. Let's take a quick look at their meanings more closely:

Employee happiness

How happy an employee is at work may not affect how hard they work. A company may offer a certain workplace culture or extra benefits like social events and voluntary benefits that make an employee happy to be at work. This doesn't necessarily mean they feel inclined to work productively to help better the organisation.

Employee satisfaction

Both employee satisfaction and happiness are similar, but employee satisfaction is often considered the 'low bar' that businesses must set in order to meet an employee's most basic needs. For example, an employee with the standard 9-5 that comes in on time and leaves at 5 pm sharp could be satisfied with their role, but they may not be happy to be there or engaged and motivated to go the extra mile for the business. For now, the job works for them, but if they received a job offer with better pay, benefits or the promise of personal development, they'll likely leave.

Employee engagement

An engaged employee will not only be satisfied with their role, but they'll also want to work harder on behalf of the business' aims. Employee engagement is the commitment an employee is willing to give to the company they work for and how motivated they are to go above and beyond. An employee often feels most engaged if they feel like their work makes a difference, they feel valued and respected, and they feel like they're part of a community in the workplace.

When it comes down to defining engagement, there are really three levels on which you should assess the state of affairs within your business:

1. **Actively Engaged:** Employees who are passionate about the work they're doing and committed to their employer.

2. **Not Engaged:** Employees who perform the bare minimum, doing what needs to be done but no more than that. They will also have few emotional attachments to their workplaces.

3. **Actively Disengaged:** Employees who actively dislike their roles. They will leave work unfinished, and often create a toxic working environment.

Businesses have a vested interest in trying to increase employee engagement levels through creating a positive work culture and investing in their employees' development.

If as a business you succeed in improving employee engagement, you'll get workers who will work as hard as possible even when the manager isn't watching them. This is also known as discretionary effort, which can be encouraged using positive reinforcement when implemented correctly.

Employees will often use discretionary effort when they establish emotional connections with their employer. They'll want to put in more than 'minimum effort'. Employees are also more likely to use discretionary effort if they enjoy what they do.

Ultimately, employee engagement goes beyond satisfaction to describe a commitment to the business and the work that is being done. An engaged employee is not simply happy; they're focused on delivering outcomes. They take pride in what they do, feel incentivised to do better and be recognised for their hard work. An engaged employee is invested in improving the business because they feel they are part of the business.

Common strategies for employee engagement

Employee engagement sounds great — obviously. So, what do you do? Paying competitive wages is a good starting point. But, as we have said, not everything comes down to money. Opportunities to advance, investment in staff development and simply seeing the impact of their efforts can each be more important to engagement than lavish remuneration packages.

Providing people with interesting jobs and autonomy over their work schedules is also a big help in creating an engaged workforce. But not every business is equally placed to pursue this kind of solution.

When it comes down to the basic strategies that apply to almost every business, they really divide into two main categories: rewards and recognition. Delivering these outcomes relies on a combination of culture and technology. However, before we get there, we need to look at these concepts in detail.

Employee recognition vs rewards

Recognition and rewards straddle two halves of human motivation — direct personal gain and reinforcement within the social hierarchy. Most employee engagement programmes pull in elements of both. However, deciding how you proportionally allocate your resources and attention is probably the largest (and first) decision you need to make when building an engagement solution.

Employee rewards programmes

The aim of a reward is to recognise and celebrate an employee's performance or achievements. A reward can be an item such as cash or a gift card that is given directly to an employee who has done well. Some rewards programmes expand this definition to include 'well-being' focused rewards, such as paid-time-off or activities.

A rewards-based programme is straightforward and direct. Some rewards systems take this even further by creating explicit 'incentives' — rewards that are tied to very specific goals or targets. For example, you could incentivise a team to reach their targets with a promise of an office party or gift cards.

Do rewards and incentives work?

Rewards and incentives can work, depending on the way you present them to employees. The cause and effect relationship between incentives and outcomes is pretty clear — people want the reward, so they work hard to achieve the needed outcomes. This can help you hit specific KPIs. However, this is a lot different than building true employee engagement.

In general, rewards-based programmes do not deliver long-term results, nor do they tend to impact how employees actually feel about work. Although they can motivate specific actions, they don't change how employees perceive their role within the workplace. That means it's unlikely to really increase the application of discretionary effort — particularly when it comes to tasks outside of the targeted KPI. Rewards appeal to an individual's extrinsic motivation while engagement is much more about intrinsic motivation.

Just like increased wages are not the "be-all and end-all" of employee engagement, simply throwing money at your staff won't make them genuinely care about the task at hand. If your goal is employee engagement, you need to look beyond rewards. That doesn't mean ignoring rewards and their ability to drive change on a targeted level, but it does mean thinking about how to change the way employees think about work. That means thinking about recognition.

Employee recognition programmes

An employee recognition programme might include rewards and incentives. However, rather than emphasising monetary gain, a recognition programme will focus on respect and social inclusion.

Employee recognition basically boils down to exactly what it sounds like — recognising people for the work that they do, and going out of your way to publicly congratulate them on a job well done. However, how this actually gets done varies a lot depending on the company.

For example, in a small business with 20 or 30 employees bunched into a single office, an employee recognition programme might be as simple as giving individuals positive feedback during regular meetings and making an effort to make similar declarations in the ear-shot of others in the office.

For large businesses with multiple locations, several layers of management, hundreds or thousands of staff and a decentralised culture, the whole process becomes far more complicated. But the basics remain the same. Employee recognition programmes acknowledge employees. Both managers and peers can recognise employees' achievements and celebrate together. When structured right, this can be done regularly, seamlessly and without significant cost.

Does employee recognition really work?

The simple answer is yes — employee recognition works. In fact, it works really well.

A 2015 study found that employees self-reported recognition as the number one factor motivating them to do 'great work'. Getting 'paid more' came in fifth, behind self motivation, feeling inspired and seeking more autonomy. Companies with employee recognition programmes have a 31% lower voluntary turnover, and individuals who don't feel recognised are twice as likely to leave.

Really, this should not be a surprise. Humans are social creatures. We crave respect from our peers and want recognition for what we do. If you want to get anthropological about it, the millennia our ancestors spent in small tribes wired our brains to look for approval from people in positions of authority. It's a critical aspect of how we assess our acceptance within the social order.

Humans also seek fairness. A large number of studies show wider-spread preference for taking a larger financial loss to avoid being subject to what is perceived to be an unfair situation. There is perhaps nothing more unfair than not being recognised for a job well done.

Placed within the modern world of work, recognition taps into both of these deeply human traits. It reassures people of their place in society and it fulfils their desire for fairness. Moreover, recognition shows someone that they're valued for what they do. 69% of employees said they would work harder if they felt that their efforts were better appreciated.

Personal recognition vs social recognition

Recognition subdivides along two broad lines: personal recognition and social recognition. Although similar, there is a reason to make this distinction. As discussed above, recognising an employee could take place solely between that employee and their supervisor. However, it can also take on a social element within the wider workplace environment.

Personal recognition shows an employee that you care about their success. Social recognition reinforces that employee's broader role and acceptance within the entire company. Generally speaking, this amplifies the impact of recognising a job well done on an individual's motivation. It also brings two distinct added benefits:

1. **Drive core values through good examples**: Social recognition not only motivates employees, it provides a public platform that can be used to define and elevate a company's core values. For example, if you recognise an employee for a job well done, they'll be motivated to repeat that behaviour. By making that recognition public, you not only reinforce the value of that recognition, you create an example that others can follow and seek to emulate.

   By sharing success stories, you create a blueprint for others. This means that your engagement programme will not only help specific employees maximise their potential, it can help direct the positive growth of your entire operation. Ultimately, by aligning recognition with your core values, you bring those core values to life — for both the individual being recognised and the company as a whole.

2. **Peer-to-peer recognition:** By making recognition social, it encourages a broader culture of recognition. This makes it far easier to expand the circle of those 'recognising' good work from solely management to the entire workforce.

   Empowering peers to recognise each other increases the amount of recognition that occurs and makes that recognition feel like an embedded part of the workplace culture. A recognition programme that's accepted and engaged with by employees loses any perceived sense of 'contrivance' and simply becomes part of what it means to work at your company. Social recognition is one of the best ways to deliver this outcome.

   Obviously, recognition is not the only thing that creates an 'engaged employee'. But it's huge to creating the kind of culture you need to maximise the potential of your staff and grow a successful business. So, how do you get this done?

Technology vs. culture: Do you need tools to engage?

The basis of everything at work comes down to processes and tools. People need the technology to get the job done, the expertise to make the right decisions and the willpower to follow through. When it comes to an employee engagement programme — the answer is exactly the same.

In order to have engaged employees, you need a plan in place, outcomes in mind, a clear outline of responsibilities and a culture that takes participation seriously. You also need a toolset available that is able to execute your plan, close distances, track results and simplify operations.

In reality, this section could realistically be called "tools and culture — a pathway to success", because there is no chance of progress without both. The real question, however, is how technological those tools you deploy need to be?

Recognition and reward platforms

Particularly when it comes to recognition, nothing beats the power of face-to-face interactions. Making sure that people have regular and positive interactions with managers and peers should be critical to your cultural-focused plan for employee engagement.

For a small company, the toolset you deploy to recognise employees could simply be weekly meetings, and the toolset for determining incentives and rewards could be as simple as an Excel sheet. But this kind of solution will not scale.

With the scope and scale of modern business in mind, tech-firms have developed a number of engagement platforms to help businesses of all kinds improve the reach and simplicity of engagement programmes. Some of these platforms specialise in reward, while others focus on recognition — a few pull together elements of both.

So what features do these tools offer and how can they benefit your employee recognition programme?

The reach of social media without the problems

Most of these engagement platforms resemble social media in some form or another. They have some sort of "news feed" system, notification features and messaging capabilities that allow staff and employees to publicly communicate in a digital space.

For large companies (particularly those with lots of locations), this creates an invaluable communal and common space in the digital sphere. Just like how social media collapses distances in our personal lives, the right engagement tools can create a sense of community and belonging in even the largest corporate environment.

These platforms allow employees to recognise another colleague or team through a mobile app that the organisation has access to. This way, an employee's achievements can be celebrated instantly and company-wide, so everyone knows about their hard work.

On one level, you could simply use social media to achieve these ends. However, particularly when it comes to recognition, the best of these tools have made several innovations specifically to improve workplace focused outcomes and remove some of the problems associated with traditional social media.

1. **Social peer-to-peer recognition:** Recognition focused apps make social recognition easy with features generally known as 'recognition cards'. These are preset functions that make it easy for employees to create posts and share them on a social timeline. This means colleagues can easily share their stories and successes with the whole company on a day-to-day basis that makes social recognition a habit. This also helps align recognition with the company's core values.

   Recognition cards make recognising others in the company quick and simple, meaning an employee or team can receive praise publicly from either a manager or peer and feel valued instantly. In most cases, simplicity is key to regular engagement.

2. **Share their story:** While appreciating others within the same organisation is essential to infusing social recognition into part of the work culture, employees should feel comfortable acknowledging their own good work.

   Some platforms allow individuals and teams to share their own story — so they can recognise themselves and their teams when they've achieved something they're proud of. Not only does this make employees feel like they're regularly accomplishing things, it also allows the rest of the organisation to keep up to date with what other departments are doing.

3. **No private chat options:** Private chat features can be a distraction. They also open the possibility to abuse the platform for unintended purposes. Much of the power of recognition comes from public congratulations — people not only want to be appreciated, they want others to know that they did a good job.

   By keeping all messages public, engagement platforms reduce the possibility of inappropriate messaging and increase the likelihood that the platform is used for the intended purposes.

4. **Chronological feeds:** Another standard feature of social media are purposefully addictive news feed algorithms. By monitoring activity and seeking to adaptively present posts that are most likely to inspire interaction, social media can keep users constantly checking feeds. This is not what you want at work.

Instead of trying to capture the attention of users, engagement platforms present posts in chronological order. In addition to minimising the addictive nature of the app, this ensures that everyone views the same feed. Ultimately, this is critical to actually deliver the communal space you want and need as part of your engagement programme.

5. **Award nomination:** This feature allows for an individual or team to be nominated for a specific award, for example, an employee who most represents a certain value, team of the month or customer service story of the quarter — to name a few examples.

   A good engagement tool won't simply leave you relying on managers to praise employees, they provide simple functions that allow employees to nominate and celebrate a colleague that they feel particularly grateful for, or did outstanding work. The rest of the company can show their appreciation for that person through likes and comments, be inspired by them and emulate them.

6. **Secondary features:** Not only can recognition platforms provide an easy way to recognise and celebrate an employee's achievements, some apps have secondary features, such as educational opportunities, company updates, rewards, surveys and polls.
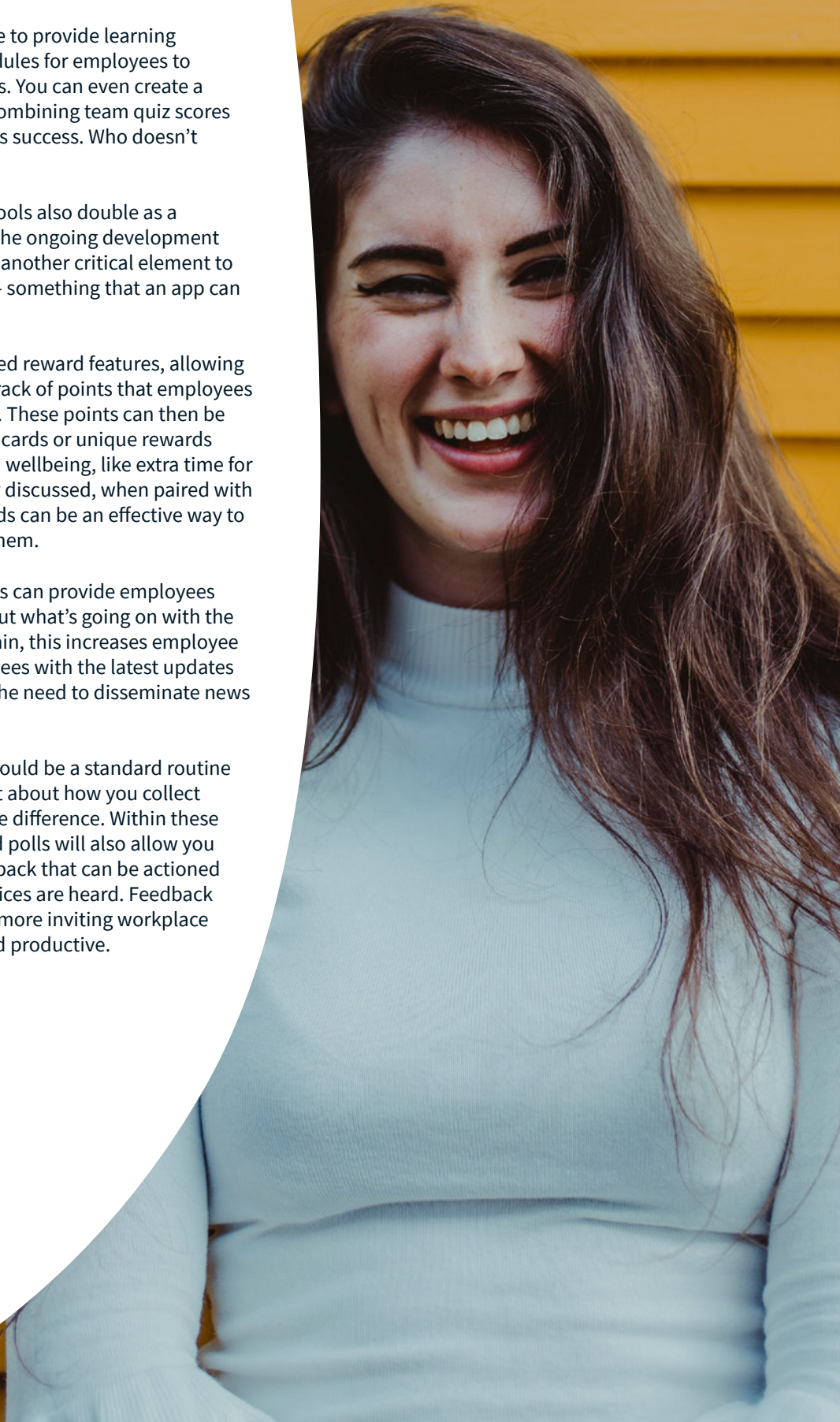
Educational opportunities are able to provide learning cards with bite-sized learning modules for employees to refresh their knowledge in minutes. You can even create a friendly in-office competition by combining team quiz scores and celebrating the winning team's success. Who doesn't want to be a winner?

In a broader sense, these kind of tools also double as a training investment in your staff. The ongoing development and skills training of employees is another critical element to creating a culture of recognition — something that an app can help you automate and deliver.

Some apps even provide automated reward features, allowing organisations the ability to keep track of points that employees can collect for their achievements. These points can then be redeemed for rewards such as gift cards or unique rewards focused on employees' health and wellbeing, like extra time for lunch or a gym pass. As previously discussed, when paired with recognition and done right, rewards can be an effective way to show employees you appreciate them.

Certain employee recognition apps can provide employees with insights and information about what's going on with the business through a news feed. Again, this increases employee engagement and provides employees with the latest updates about the business and removes the need to disseminate news another way.

Employee engagement surveys should be a standard routine within your organisation — it's just about how you collect that information that can make the difference. Within these apps, features such as surveys and polls will also allow you to get streamlined employee feedback that can be actioned efficiently, ensuring everyone's voices are heard. Feedback can be taken on board to create a more inviting workplace where employees are engaged and productive.

Data reporting

The next key feature of taking your engagement programme online is access to the data and tracking the information it provides. You can pull reports on the levels of activity on the app, such as recognition sent, rewards redeemed, and the number of likes and comments. This feature tracks how different people engage on the platform, allowing you to use that information to assess your progress towards creating a culture of appreciation.

Data analytics

Once those reports have been made, it makes it far easier to then correlate that data with other KPIs. For example, where activity is high, you can look at whether that correlates with better staff retention, better customer service, or higher levels of productivity/sales and efficiency. You can then go and take the necessary actions to improve engagement. Basically, data informs better decision-making, and digitising your engagement systems helps bring to bear analytics tools to improve your understanding of the data.

Streamline processes with automation

These digital tools can ensure that you can utilise recognition in an easy and efficient way while removing the burden of administrative tasks that waste time. Instead, processes are automated and employers can implement a recognition programme that is simply adopted throughout the organisation as a whole with little friction involved. Employers can easily track the activity within the app and use this data to understand whether streamlined peer-to-peer recognition is helping employees to become more engaged.

Check your social timeline

Lastly, a benefit of these apps is simply providing an alternative to social media. Truth be told, employees often use their phones during the workday, so why not provide them with an app where they can see what their colleagues are doing and how they're succeeding? With technological tools to help enhance your employee recognition programme, employees can take a break from work but still improve their engagement!

Get a tailored solution that works for you

While apps can provide many features for your employees to recognise and celebrate people's work achievements, not every feature will be critical to your engagement programme. It's important that you get a bespoke solution that works for your specific organisation and employees.

By getting an external recognition platform, you can consult with experts to build a tailored solution. So whether you want a reward points system or learning cards which help employees develop new skills through the app, you can find the platform for you if you do your research.

Lastly, it's critical to focus on building a culture that values engagement, rewards and recognition. If you invest in a cutting-edge engagement app and no one in your business actually uses it — you would have been better off focusing on getting people to be nicer to each other in person. If you want a culture of engagement, you need to invest in culture along with technology.

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How to build an employee recognition and engagement programme in your workplace

Building an employee engagement programme in your workplace requires focus. You need a plan that takes into account the specifics of your business, you need to be equipped with the right tools, and you need mechanisms in place to track success. Lastly, you need a view for the long-term.

The outcome that is best suited for your business will depend on the specifics. However, these steps will help guide you to making a decision that is right for you.

Step 1: Set clear and focused goals

You always need to start with goals. Every business decision should start with a clear outline of what you are looking to achieve. So, what exactly would you like your outcomes to be? Here are some examples to help you get started:

- **Improve productivity:** You may simply want to increase productivity in the workplace without spending too much on incentives or rewards.

- **Create a more positive working environment:** Create a culture of recognition to help employees feel celebrated, even by each other, so that a more positive community can be established.

- **Improve employee retention:** If your business has a high voluntary employee turnover, a recognition programme can help employees feel more valued and will therefore be less likely to leave.

- **Help employees improve their personal development:** Tracking the progress of employees can be tricky, but with a properly implemented recognition programme, this can be easier, meaning employees are more likely to develop.

Depending on where your priorities sit, you will need to take different steps to ensure those outcomes are met. You will also need to craft a different reporting mechanism to make sure that progress can be tracked.

Having clear goals will also make it easier to get buy-in from senior management. Having the support of leadership is critical to getting the funding and attention required to really overhaul your employee engagement strategy. Looking at outcomes will not only increase the probability that positive results are actually achievable, it increases your chance of getting started on the project in the first place.

Step 2: Consider how rewards play into your plan

Not every engagement plan needs rewards, but they can be a good option to integrate into your strategy — particularly if there are very specific objectives that you want to achieve. If you uncover such objectives while setting your goals, you should think about aligning specific rewards with those targeted outcomes. However, you shouldn't rely on rewards as a central feature of creating engagement. You also need to make sure that your use of rewards doesn't introduce other problems.

Avoid creating friction

The biggest risk with a rewards programme is introducing friction into the process of recognising employees. Ultimately, rewards programmes are just recognition programmes that are codified around reward. This can seem beneficial, but not only can the added monetary value of the reward actually 'cheapen' its intrinsic value, it can restrict how freely that recognition is given.

To be effective, recognition needs to be abundant and flow freely. This can be done using rewards, but it's an added risk that you need to consider when building your programme. An 80% recognition and 20% rewards split is not a hard and fast rule, but it's something that we have seen work as a target within a lot of corporate environments.

Consider non-traditional rewards

Rewards could include cash, gift cards and company outings. However, these kinds of rewards can often come across as impersonal, rather than helping to celebrate an employee's achievement.

Rewards that aim to improve employees' health and wellbeing and provide them with more time are increasingly being viewed as more valuable rewards to employees. This is because employees want their employers to view them as people rather than cogs in a machine. Employers who provide these kinds of rewards are often those that value their employees and benefit from a more productive workforce, resulting in increased profitability.

These kinds of rewards could include gym memberships, meditation and exercise applications, or extra time off, which could be an extra hour for lunch. Time is a valuable commodity and so these types of rewards really show how much you appreciate your employees and what they do for the business.

However, rewards are often not an effective way to show employees you appreciate them unless they're given alongside acknowledgement and praise. You need to make sure that you do both, and do so without creating friction within the process.

Step 3: Make sure you acknowledge your employees

To truly implement an employee recognition programme effectively within an organisation, you need to recognise your employees. For all of the reasons that we have outlined in this eBook so far, recognition — and social recognition — should sit at the heart of your engagement plan. But you need to make sure that you do it in the right way.

Acknowledge employees the right way

How you go about recognising employees' great work is important. Depending on what you're acknowledging them for, there may be more effective ways to show your gratitude.

For example, you should be aiming to acknowledge employees on a daily basis. If they've finished a task that you asked for, even if it's small, throw them a quick "thanks for doing that" or "good job". However, if it's a particular long-term project or a massive task that was completed, a simple "thank you" won't cut it. If your employee has done an exemplary job that's worth celebrating, then it should be celebrated. Take them aside and tell them how much you appreciate the hard work they put into the task. You want to show them that you do truly value them.

Social recognition and core values

While recognition is a great way to increase employee engagement, social recognition can be even more effective. Implement this peer-to-peer recognition within your workplace by thanking employees in front of the whole team for the outstanding work they did. This public praise can set a good example for other employees — they'll see that hard work pays off and is properly acknowledged in the workplace, motivating them to perform better.

While getting praise from senior members of staff is motivational, it shouldn't stop there. As managers get into the habit of acknowledging individuals and teams, employees will start doing this to other employees.

Align these recognition patterns with your company's core values so you can create a platform that can help shape and drive your company culture in the way you want. This will in turn help create a culture of appreciation, which will help ensure recognition becomes second nature within the organisation as a whole. This is what you should be aiming to do when implementing an employee recognition programme.

Acknowledging employees using technology

As previously discussed, social recognition platforms can help your organisation acknowledge employees on a grander scale. It can even make it easier for employees to publicly recognise other employees in a communal digital space — an invaluable asset not otherwise possible in the 'real world'.

This technology can also provide the ability to have access to reporting and analytics tools that help managers overseeing very large numbers of people keep on top of the accomplishments of each one individually.

Whether large or small, every success is worth acknowledging and celebrating. Recognition goes far in motivating employees and making them feel appreciated.

Step 4: Pick the right tools

Determining the need to use technology in your engagement strategy is a big choice. It can increase the overhead costs of getting started, but it can make success simpler and cheaper in the long run. The last thing you want is for your engagement programme to damage productivity.

The size of your business is really the number one factor determining the value of technology to your engagement plan. If you are a small but growing company, it can be hard to determine how necessary such an investment is today, but you should project into the future and plan accordingly.

As a general rule of thumb, if your business has fewer than 100 people, most engagement strategies can be better executed with culturally-focused, manual processes. Over 500 employees, and the complexity of managing either a rewards or recognition programme is so challenging that technology is almost a prerequisite to success.

The grey zone is for mid-sized business with between 100 and 500 employees. This type of organisation could benefit from a good engagement app, but the return on investment will be less than a larger organisation will achieve — simply because of setup costs. With that said, there are certain factors that increase the value of app investment, including:

- Lots of remote workers

- Multiple office/store locations

- On-the-road employees — e.g. sales or logistics

- A lot of granular activities (such as software development) that can be recognised on a very specific basis

- Any broad challenges in facilitating communication between staff and management

Next, your challenge is picking a tool that will deliver what you need. Make sure to keep in mind the options we discussed in section 3 and look to find a solution that aligns with your other outcomes and business needs.

Make sure you use tools that align with your goals

If you decide to invest in software to augment your engagement programme, you need to make sure that it's capable of delivering on the outcomes and strategies you have identified. For example, a focus on rewards won't help you deliver the recognition that should sit at the heart of your programme. However, if you pick a tool with no rewards features, that could prevent you from using rewards to target specific KPIs.

Tools that can deliver both rewards and recognition capabilities are obviously the most versatile solution. Most tools do at least state that they can 'do it all'. However, if you want to know a tool's focus, investigate how you pay for the platform. For example, a lot of rewards focused tools make their money by taking a commission on rewards delivered. That means that they'll encourage rewards as part of their business model. Picking tools that operate on a subscription model will generally deliver better recognition capabilities and less biased advice on when it's best to deploy rewards within your engagement system.

Step 5: Plan for the obvious challenges

Change is never seamless. If you want the construction of your new employee engagement programme to go smoothly, you need to plan for the obvious challenges that will arise. Lets go over those to give you the best chance at success.

1. Getting investment from the top

Convincing senior executives that they should invest in employee engagement isn't always easy — but it's key. Getting leadership on board is essential to securing funding, and critical to creating a workplace culture that prioritises recognition and engagement.

What to do: This comes down to two things. First, selling leadership on the value of employee engagement. Second, delivering a detailed plan outlining your strategy and what it will achieve. A lot of the steps you have taken up to this point will help you achieve this. However, make sure that you keep the goal of getting leadership involved front of mind during your planning.

2. Getting broad organisational buy-in

When organisations try to implement changes within the workplace, employees can often view it as a superficial way for company leaders to show they're concerned about the employees' wellbeing. If you are committed to making real change, you need to combat the idea that this is simply a passing trend and get buy-in from across the organisation.

What to do: Getting commitment from leadership and middle management is the first step to making sure your plans are taken seriously. Next, it comes down to setting clear, focused goals and a structured method to ensure your efforts pay off. You need to make your objective clear and follow through.

We will return to the cultural element of this process in the next step. However, fundamentally, getting organisational buy-in requires baking engagement into your workplace culture. This is how engagement becomes integral to your organisation, rather than a passing trend that's adopted for a short time and then abandoned.

You can also ensure your recognition programme isn't abandoned by implementing a solid launch strategy during the process. This can be bolstered by appointing programme champions or ambassadors who can help make sure that a process is being followed and assist in overcoming any challenges that may arise along the way.

3. Vague and hard to define results

Improving employee engagement is a long-term process that delivers long-term results. This makes attributing improvements to engagement a challenge. This is even more the case when it comes to the transformative potential of 'recognition'. Tracking the impact of rewards programmes on KPIs is one thing, but looking at overall productivity increases as a result of employees simply caring more is hard to quantify.

What to do: There's no cut and dried method of measuring employee engagement. However, you can start by picking a few critical KPIs and simply tracking change. Realistically, give yourself at least one quarter (if not two) to review results. This will give you a broad metric for success.

You can also use your engagement tools and infrastructure to seek feedback from employees on how they see the programme working. Ultimately, an engagement programme is targeted at improving the wellbeing of staff. Although it's not the only valuable piece of information, simply asking employees how it has impacted them is a good starting point for deciding what has worked.

Step 6: Develop a cultural shift

Having your goals in mind and technology choices outlined is great. Having a roadmap to handle the challenge is even better. But, now the hard part begins.

To be honest, the real challenge of any new programme is making sure that people are committed to your new system. To truly succeed, from both a rewards and recognition standpoint, you need people to participate. That means creating an inviting workplace culture that will help you nurture a culture of recognition and engagement.

Start at the top

The easiest place to start is at the top. If you want staff to take your new engagement system seriously, it helps if their managers lead the charge. You also want to reward management. Make it known that participation is noticed and rewarded.

Build momentum

A properly constructed engagement system will help perpetuate itself. Everyone likes being recognised and rewarded. So a big part of the job is just getting the ball rolling. However, everything will run more smoothly if you have a good framework in place from the start.

The best recognition systems go beyond management and are driven by peer-to-peer recognition. This is something that is far harder to artificially create, and relies on improved engagement over time. The right tools that make this kind of engagement simple will increase uptake. You can also use those same platforms to reward and recognise employees simply for engaging with your new system.

Play the long game and invite advice

There's no point forcing a culture of recognition upon your employees. You want them to feel like it's something they've helped create and something that they believe in too. It also won't happen overnight. An inviting workplace culture that helps improve engagement will take time to create, especially one that seamlessly integrates the value of recognising employees' performances and successes. Interaction and feedback are key.

Step 7: Standardise your onboarding process and provide regular training

Utilising recognition to increase employee engagement needs to happen from the start of an employee's journey with you — and then it needs to be continuously implemented. This will help the whole organisation understand that hard work is valued and appreciated.

Onboarding new employees

If you don't have a regular procedure you follow when inducting new employees into the company, they may struggle to feel like part of the workforce. Onboarding can help encourage relationships among employees, as demonstrated by research which found that only 28% of employees with no work friends were engaged compared to 69% with 25 or more friends.

There are many ways you can build up and standardise your onboarding checklist. For example:

- Ensure you have an onboarding guide so the employee can be properly introduced to the company.

- Work directly with the employee and make sure they have everything they need.

- Have one-to-one meetings on a weekly basis, which will also help them communicate with you.

- Let them know your workplace is a welcoming space which values hard work — and show them that this will be appreciated.

You want to create a culture of recognition from the get-go. Make this a repeatable process so new employees feel like they're part of the team, giving them all the more reason to be engaged and achieve more at work.

Providing regular training

Training your employees is essential in the workplace. If you don't train them, how will they improve, stay engaged and work productively? Neglecting employee training will also leave many people bored. Most employees want to learn new skills and develop themselves and research supports this — 87% of millennials (and 69% of non-millennials) view development as important in their jobs.

Here are some ways you can provide training for employees in creative ways to keep them engaged:

- Set up a regular training session for all employees e.g. once a month

- Get competent employees to host their own training courses and pass on their skills and knowledge to other employees

- Set training goals and objectives so employees can work towards something

- Ask employees what kind of training they want and get continuous feedback so your training can be improved

Acknowledging that employees are skilled and capable should become a habit once you've implemented an employee recognition programme. Training employees demonstrates that you're aware of their abilities and want to help them improve. You need to consistently recognise their value so they stay engaged and productive!

Step 8: Get regular team feedback

Whatever you add to your employee recognition programme, you need to ensure it's working for your employees. They're the ones you're trying to engage through recognition, so you need to check if your newly implemented efforts make them feel recognised.

Getting feedback should actually be part of your recognition plan from the start. Part of engaging with staff is giving them a voice. Research shows that 69% of employees whose managers help them set performance goals are engaged, compared to 8% of people whose managers didn't. This kind of back and forth engagement is what a positive culture of recognition is really all about.

For small businesses, getting feedback can be as simple as asking questions during weekly meetings. In a bigger operation, the entire architecture of your engagement platform should be repurposed to help you get the feedback you need. Engagement apps can help you do this in a number of ways, including:

Pulse polls

Unlike traditional annual surveys, pulse polls are shorter but happen more regularly. This way, you have a better idea of what employees are feeling as you roll out your recognition programme. This makes pulse polls a great way to monitor real-time feedback.

Using this real-time feedback, you can make quick tweaks and adjustments to your programme to help improve it and ensure employees are feeling valued and engaged.

Lifecycle surveys

Lifecycle surveys are taken at key moments during an employee's lifecycle, for example, during onboarding, promotions and exits. These surveys can provide great insight into how the organisation is performing. You can then use this feedback to improve your procedures and ensure employees feel recognised throughout their employment in order to improve engagement.

Feedback platform

While taking surveys and polls is a great way to get specific insights from employees about how your recognition programme is performing, you should also provide a platform that will allow employees to give any feedback they have. This could include queries, concerns or suggestions for improvement.

This platform could be a suggestion box in the office or an online platform that is easily accessible to anyone. This makes it clear to employees that their opinions are valued in the workplace and their feedback will always be heard.

Improved communication

Similarly to always ensuring employees feel listened to, you want to create a culture of transparency so employees always feel comfortable talking to senior management about certain issues or concerns. Employees should feel like there's an open dialogue in the workplace.

What's right for your organisation?

Every business is different, so it's only natural that the methods you use to increase employee engagement levels aren't the same as another business. You need to think about what employee engagement means for your individual company — there's no one size fits all when it comes to engagement. Figure out your aims and whatever strategy you take, tailor it to your business, values and employees.

Doing this will not only help you create a positive culture that ensures employees are properly satisfied and engaged, but it will also help you when trying to measure employee engagement. Only when you know the outcomes you want from improving employee engagement will you be able to implement a strategy that works.

Defining the future of the workplace

Employee engagement isn't a fluffy trend that's about to disappear. It matters to your organisation's success and it's here to stay.

The next generation of workers have a new set of priorities, and finding meaning in what they do is central to that. As an employer, you can't always impact the perceived social value of your industry. However, there are a lot of tools at your disposal to help your staff understand the value that they provide to your organisation.

Central to captivating the dedication of any employee is creating an engagement programme that makes them feel valued for a job well done. Most of that outcome comes down to recognition. Rewards and incentives can play a valuable role in directing specific actions regarding particular KPIs. However, you have to make sure that those rewards don't introduce friction that hinders the free-flow of recognition that should sit at the heart of your engagement programme.

Your main goal must centre on developing systems of reciprocity and a culture that encourages and recognises self-motivated success. That is what employee engagement is all about, and recognition is your main tool to delivering that outcome.

Engagement and culture

The effectiveness of your employee engagement programme will come down to culture. In reality, what you're seeking to create is a 'culture of engagement'. The different recognition and reward tools that you deploy to achieve engagement will only be effective if they're culturally accepted.

You want your organisation to develop a culture of appreciation that doesn't feel gimmicky or forced — recognising one another and celebrating accomplishments need to become habits that everyone adopts. But the relationship between engagement and culture is a two way street. Particularly when it comes to things like social recognition, the solution you deploy to encourage engagement can, in turn, influence the culture you build.

By aligning recognition with your company's core values, you build a platform that brings those values to life. When done effectively, social recognition will allow you to mould your workplace culture in a way that naturally celebrates employees' achievement. This will lead to a more positive work environment that will help increase productivity, engagement and employee retention.

How technology is driving growth

Technology can help you achieve engagement outcomes by making it easier to scale to any engagement programme. Digital space can bridge distances and analytics tools make it simpler for managers to provide personal feedback to a large number of people.

Technology has already helped organisations to increase employee engagement and productivity by streamlining processes in the workplace. Its also allowed organisations to make communication easier among employees. Regardless of how you apply technology, you need to ensure that every part of your recognition programme can be filtered down to the whole company from the top, creating a culture in which stories of employees are shared, and success can be valued — no matter how large the company.

Invest in your employees

Investing in engagement is an investment in your people. Investing in the personal development of employees will help them feel engaged. But, particularly when it comes to recognition, the simple act of publicly congratulating success provides a roadmap for others to follow if they want to improve.

By aligning your organisation's core values with recognition, you can permeate these values through the company as a whole and ensure your employees feel appreciated and engaged. This also creates a culture of engagement that encourages driving behaviours so your employees feel motivated to do great work.

A good engagement programme creates a positive feedback loop which motivates your top performers and helps everyone else up their game. Engagement is the most powerful tool at your disposal to optimising productivity and helping grow your business and employees together. Recognition is the most powerful tool at your disposal to creating engagement.

The undisputed truth is that engaged employees do better work, are less likely to leave their job and have more fun at work. It's truly a win-win situation for staff and businesses alike. Shape your organisation in a way that continuously values employees and allows them to shine. Get planning and good luck!

Find out how our employee engagement app, Rippl, can help you run an impactful and lasting engagement programme that drives productivity through social recognition, and brings your culture to life.

Book a Demo →