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Recognition in action

Four real-world examples from the Harvard Business Review Analytic Services Report: Improving Business Performance Through Appreciation

Learn how

leading organizations use appreciation to reinforce strategy, shape behavior, and make performance more visible.

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ABOUT THIS COLLECTION

The stories behind the research

The four customer stories in this collection are based on interviews conducted with Achievers customers as part of the research process that informed the *Harvard Business Review Analytic Services Report: Improving Business Performance Through Appreciation.*

This report combines survey findings from 566 business leaders and practitioners with perspectives from executives and organizations using recognition strategically to support business performance. Workday, General Motors, Coles, and Kyndryl shared real-world examples that helped illustrate themes emerging from the research, including behavior change, organizational alignment, employee engagement, technology adoption and performance visibility.

The stories that follow are expanded narratives inspired by those research conversations. While the report features each organization as an illustrative example within the broader findings, this collection provides more room to explore how recognition is applied in practice.

FOUR DIMENSIONS OF RECOGNITION IN ACTION

01 WORKDAY

Behavior change and AI adoption

02 GENERAL MOTORS

Organizational alignment

03 COLES

Frontline connection and visibility

04 KYNDRYL

Manager effectiveness and performance visibility

Together, the stories show appreciation operating as more than an employee experience initiative. It can also reinforce desired behaviors, clarify priorities, and support progress toward business goals.

For the complete research findings, see *Improving Business Performance Through Appreciation from Harvard Business Review Analytic Services.*

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STORY 1 | **BEHAVIOR CHANGE AND AI ADOPTION**

Inside Workday's Everyday AI strategy

How recognition helps turn a transformation priority into visible, repeatable action.

Every organization wants employees to embrace new technology. The harder part is turning a strategic priority into something people actually do every day.

That challenge is especially relevant with artificial intelligence. Organizations can provide tools and training, but access alone does not establish new habits. Employees also need clear signals about which actions matter, what responsible adoption looks like and how new ways of working connect to business priorities.

The Harvard Business Review Analytic Services research found that **88% of leader organizations** design their reward and recognition programs to drive specific employee behaviors. Workday offers a practical example of that idea in action.

Making AI part of everyday work

Workday has an ongoing "Everyday AI" initiative that encourages employees to use AI tools to become more productive. To support the initiative, the organization introduced an "Everyday AI" category in its recognition platform, alongside a category for innovation. Recognition shared through the platform is tagged to a behavior Workday has identified as strategically important.

That connection gives the strategy a visible presence in day-to-day work. Instead of AI adoption living only in leadership messages or training materials, employees can see examples of colleagues using new tools and contributing to the initiative. Recognition helps show what the priority looks like when it moves from intention to action.

A signal employees can see

The report describes recognition as a kind of compass: a system that can direct attention, time, and energy toward what matters. At Workday, behavior-based categories give employees a shared language for connecting appreciation to strategy.

The approach also makes strategically important contributions more visible across the organization. Recognition can highlight experimentation, innovation, and productive uses of technology when those actions occur, creating a stream of concrete examples rather than relying on abstract instructions alone.

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Turning appreciation into performance insight

Workday has also established a two-way integration between its recognition platform and its HR system. The integration resulted in a **70% year-on-year increase** in the volume of employee feedback available to managers in the HR platform.

That additional feedback gives managers more visibility into accomplishments and contributions. Recognition is not only reinforcing behavior in the moment. It is also creating a richer record of how work is happening across the organization.

What Workday's story adds to the research

Workday demonstrates how recognition can support transformation by connecting a business priority to everyday employee behavior. The "Everyday AI" category provides a practical way to celebrate adoption, make desired actions visible and keep the strategy present in the flow of work.

For organizations navigating AI-enabled change, the lesson is simple: a priority becomes more tangible when employees can see the behaviors behind it being recognized in real time.

STORY 2 | **ORGANIZATIONAL ALIGNMENT**

Why General Motors replaced more than 60 recognition programs with one

How a unified approach helps a global workforce receive a clearer, more consistent signal.

In a large organization, recognition can multiply quickly. So can the messages it sends.

Different teams may celebrate different accomplishments. Local programs may evolve independently. Over time, employees can encounter dozens of approaches that each point toward a slightly different version of what matters.

General Motors faced that challenge at scale. The company replaced more than 60 fragmented local recognition programs with one cohesive approach for its workforce of approximately 160,000 employees.

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When more programs create more noise

Multiple recognition programs can create many opportunities to celebrate employees, but they can also make organizational priorities less consistent. If one program emphasizes innovation, another service and another operational excellence, the workforce may receive competing signals about the behaviors the organization most wants to reinforce.

The HBR Analytic Services research found a clear difference in program design: **88% of leader organizations** agree that their recognition program is designed to drive specific employee behaviors, compared with 28% of laggard organizations. The distinction is not simply how much recognition happens. It is how deliberately recognition is connected to strategy.

One organization, one clearer message

By moving to a single approach, GM created a common structure for recognition across the enterprise. A unified program gives employees a more consistent view of the values and behaviors being celebrated, regardless of business unit or location.

That consistency matters in an organization where people work across functions, geographies and teams. Recognition can translate broad priorities into visible examples of everyday action. When the system is unified, those examples are more likely to point in the same direction.

Starting the signal early

GM also uses recognition during onboarding. The company introduced a welcome-to-the-team card so leaders can share encouraging messages within a new employee's first week. In a hybrid workforce, that early acknowledgement can help new hires feel integrated, valued and connected from the beginning.

The example reinforces a broader theme from the research: appreciation is most effective when it is timely, frequent and meaningful. It does not need to wait for a major milestone. It can begin with the first moments of the employee experience.

What GM's story adds to the research

GM's consolidation illustrates how recognition can support alignment at enterprise scale. Replacing fragmented programs with one approach does more than simplify administration. It creates a shared mechanism for showing employees which behaviors and priorities matter across the organization.

For complex organizations, clarity is a performance advantage. Recognition can help create that clarity when every message reinforces the same direction.

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STORY 3 | **FRONTLINE CONNECTION AND VISIBILITY**

What Coles learned from more than 3 million recognitions

How a shared recognition experience became a connection channel across a large, distributed workforce.

Keeping employees connected is challenging in any organization. It becomes even more complex when much of the workforce is spread across locations and rarely sits behind a desk.

Australian supermarket chain Coles has approximately 115,000 employees. Individual stores can feel like separate businesses, which makes shared culture and connection especially important.

Coles achieved 95% active participation on its recognition platform. Within 12 months of launch, the organization reached **one million recognitions**. It has since recorded **more than three million**.

Recognition that reaches across stores

A recognition platform creates another way to reach employees who are not deskbound. Appreciation shared in one location can become visible beyond that immediate store, helping individual contributions connect to the broader organization.

Each recognition also carries information. It can show how employees are helping customers, supporting colleagues, or living company values. Across a distributed workforce, those examples provide a steady stream of stories about what good work looks like.

Participation creates momentum

At **95% active participation,** recognition is not limited to a small group of managers or employees. It becomes part of how the organization communicates and reinforces culture.

The volume matters because repeated visibility can turn isolated moments of thanks into a shared organizational conversation. Employees see contributions from across the business, while recognition travels beyond the team or store where it originated.

The research found that leader organizations are more likely than laggards to report improvements in collaboration, productivity, customer experience and innovation or problem-solving. Coles provides an organizational example of the connection and visibility that can help recognition support those kinds of outcomes.

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Choice changes the experience

Coles employees can choose how to redeem the recognition points they earn. The most commonly selected reward is a Coles gift card. The element of choice matters: a reward that could once be perceived as benefiting the company is received differently when employees actively select it from a range of options.

That detail reflects another advantage of dedicated recognition technology. Among organizations using a platform, 41% cite the ability for employees to select the rewards most appealing to them as a benefit.

What Coles' story adds to the research

Coles shows how recognition can become more than a reward mechanism. At scale, it can create visibility, connect employees across locations and provide a shared channel for reinforcing culture.

More than three million recognitions represent millions of visible examples of contribution. For a frontline workforce, that can make the wider organization feel closer and everyday work feel more connected to collective success.

STORY 4 | **MANAGER EFFECTIVENESS AND PERFORMANCE VISIBILITY**

What Kyndryl discovered about managers and recognition

How recognition data can reveal contribution, strengthen manager insight, and reinforce business priorities.

Recognition is often viewed through the employee experience lens. Kyndryl's experience adds another dimension: recognition can also create useful insight for managers and the organization.

Kyndryl intentionally ties its recognition program to behaviors that drive business strategy and help the company serve customers. Improved engagement is a positive outcome, but the program's purpose is broader: reinforce the actions the organization wants to see repeated.

Connecting appreciation to strategy

The approach reflects one of the report's strongest themes. Recognition has greater strategic value when it is linked to specific behaviors and business priorities, rather than operating as a separate culture initiative.

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At Kyndryl, appreciation helps employees see which actions support the company's direction. The positive employee experience and the business signal work together: people feel recognized while the organization reinforces the behaviors that matter.

A richer view of contribution

Kyndryl's recognition platform integrates with its HR system so recognition feedback automatically appears in the employee feedback section of the HR platform. Achievements shared through recognition become more visible to managers and can contribute additional context during talent and performance conversations.

That visibility helps address a familiar challenge. Managers do not always see every contribution, particularly when work crosses teams and functions. Recognition can capture examples of collaboration, customer impact and achievement closer to the moment they occur.

The manager effect

Kyndryl combined employee engagement survey data with recognition platform data and identified a potential relationship between manager recognition activity and engagement. Managers in the top 25% of recognition givers had higher engagement scores than managers in the bottom quartile. The organization continues to monitor the trend.

The finding does not establish causation, but it offers a useful line of sight into how recognition behavior and manager experience may move together. Leaders who recognize frequently also create more visibility into contributions across their teams.

Recognition as performance context

Traditional performance information often centers on goals, formal feedback and manager observation. Recognition adds another source of context by recording contributions throughout the year. It can surface work that might otherwise be overlooked or forgotten by the time formal reviews occur.

For organizations seeking a more complete view of how work gets done, that additional layer of feedback can be valuable. It makes achievement more visible and helps managers connect everyday contributions to broader business priorities.

What Kyndryl's story adds to the research

Kyndryl demonstrates that recognition creates value in more than one direction. Employees receive appreciation, managers gain greater visibility and the organization builds a richer picture of the behaviors supporting performance.

When recognition becomes part of the performance ecosystem, appreciation and insight reinforce each other.

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ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Improving business performance through appreciation

Harvard Business Review Analytic Services surveyed 566 members of the Harvard Business Review audience in March and April 2026. Respondents qualified to participate if they had knowledge of their organization's reward and recognition program and how it influences business performance.

The report combines the quantitative survey with perspectives from business executives, organizational leaders and subject-matter experts. It examines the execution gap between recognition's perceived importance and its effectiveness, the role of strategic program design, the business improvements organizations report and the ways technology can support frequent, meaningful appreciation.

The four narratives in this collection expand on organizational examples featured in the report. They are intended as a companion to the research, not as standalone case studies or independent evaluations of company performance.

Get the complete findings

Read the full Harvard Business Review Analytic Services report, sponsored by Achievers, for the data and perspectives behind these stories.

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