

Long-Distance Recognition

Now that the world of work is branching away from a central location,
How do you praise workers when they're miles and miles away?

By Bob Nelson, Ph.D.

Karla Herzog had a problem. As the president of Total Personnel Service in San Diego, she knew it was important to stay in touch with the employees she hired and placed with clients, but since she hardly ever saw them once they were hired, the task was daunting. How could she connect with employees who were always with clients at locations other than her own? How could she make them feel special when she never saw them and knew nothing of their needs, frustrations, and successes in their jobs?

With the changing nature of work today, more managers are in Herzog's spot. They have to adapt to new circumstances for recognizing employee performance. Increasingly, empowered employees are working more independently in their jobs with the authority and autonomy to act in the best interests of the company. Many organizations are also moving to decentralized operations, so an employee's manager may physically be located at a different facility or even a different state. And global companies increasingly expect executives to oversee staff in remote, and often overseas, locations.

The workplace itself is being redefined to include such arrangements as telecommuting, flexible working hours, and job sharing. "Futurework: Trends and Challenges for Work in the 21st Century," a report by the Department of Labor, found that roughly one in 10 workers fits into an alternative work arrangement, with nearly 80 percent of employers offering some form of nontraditional staffing arrangements. And some 47 percent of employees today now do some amount of telecommuting.

So how can managers best recognize performance when employees may not even have physical contact with their managers for weeks or months at a time? In a virtual environment, recognition needs to be more of a conscious and planned act because there are not as many spontaneous opportunities to acknowledge an employee's hard work and accomplishments. Making sure a virtual employee stays motivated, happy, and productive is the key to ensuring the success of a virtual workplace.

Herzog understood that, and found new ways to manage, communicate with, and recognize her employees. That means delivering recognition awards to the

employees at the client site, or sending them to the client to present to her employees. She uses every type of communication with her employees as an opportunity to recognize and better communicate. Herzog has the payroll department include fax-back forms with all employee paychecks to see how things were going, and asks her employees to tell her of any questions or concerns. She then takes those issues seriously—and gets back to the employees quickly to resolve them.

Make time for people

There's no substitute for face time when it comes to building trusting relationships. At The Ken Blanchard Companies in Escondido, Calif., the company expects all managers to hold one-on-one meetings with each direct report at least once every two weeks for at least 20 minutes. Sometimes, those meetings are on the phone, but the employee always sets the agenda. If your employees are in the office less, coordinate your schedules so that you are at work when your employees are there. This could be a set time each week or during "core hours" when everyone is present (if your company operates that way). Talk about real issues of importance to employees, the work, or the company in general.

Keeping the sense of teamwork

One of the cornerstones of the virtual office is making sure that virtual employees feel they are an important part of the team. Employees are motivated by managers who take the time to get to know them. A recent survey of 500 professional employees by MasteryWorks in Annandale, Virginia, found that the primary factor affecting a respondent's decision to leave an organization was whether or not the manager developed a trusting relationship

with them. Says Caela Farren, CEO of MasteryWorks, "Managers who get to know their people, respect and trust the competency of their employees, and listen continually for how employees are doing relative to their aspirations, quality of work life, and sense of career advancement, will have a far greater chance of developing and retaining their employees."

Working as a virtual team may mean that employees are working on the same project, but limited face-to-face contact can make virtual employees feel isolated from other team members and they may be unable to see how their efforts contribute to the end results.

Managers must take a proactive role in fostering a sense of teamwork by involving virtual workers in all team meetings through any available means—telephone conferencing, e-mail, chat rooms, etc. Be sure to include some form of recognition in all team meetings. Verbal ways to recognize employees from a distance include:

- Acknowledging a good comment.
- Recognizing small accomplishments
- Rewarding the honoring of commitments.
- Thanking a "lurker" (someone who doesn't often post comments to e-mail discussions or chat rooms) for giving input to the discussion.
- Praising someone for bringing up a not-so-popular opinion or idea.
- Recognizing and praising group dynamics.

Increase communication as you increase distance

We know from electronics that the farther the source, the weaker and more distorted the signal. Likewise, the greater the distance from one's manager, the greater the effort

both parties have to make to keep in touch. This can be done through updates, and/or more frequently scheduled meetings and visits. When Intel Corp. founder and chairman Andy Grove visits his company's workplaces, he has an open-comment session in the cafeteria and invites employees to bend his ear. Another executive I know keeps office hours when he visits his company's plants so that any employee can sign up for an individual meeting. Consider using other means to stay connected: newsletters, Web chats, electronic message boards and conference calls. Provide the same types of communication, recognition and rewards that you provide for those employees who are located closer to you.

Use technology. Don't let it use you

Too often, managers use technology like voice-mail or e-mail as another means to dump work on their employees. It may seem faster and more efficient to do so, but employees are denied even a chance to ask questions about projects that are assigned when work is delegated via such one-way communication vehicles.

So use technology as a communication tool, not just as a way to offload a new project. As more employees work off-site on either a full or part-time basis, managers will need to incorporate the Internet and company intranets into their reward and recognition programs. These vehicles also can be used to promote the exchange of information and encourage questions. Managers can create problem discussion boards, host "chats," or create an "applause" bulletin board to capture the exchange of group praising. That's the approach at Hughes Network Systems, a high-tech company I've worked with in San Diego. Whenever anyone in the

company logs on the company's intranet, a bulletin board pops up labeled "APPLAUSE" and anyone can add a comment of praise for someone else in the organization to this message board, which after a few days scroll off the screen. AG Edwards, the financial services firm, hosts weekly audio conference calls of all employees—nationwide. Employees at Home Depot love the weekly satellite feeds to every store, which are dubbed "Breakfast with Bernie & Arthur," their chairman and CEO. These examples show the ability companies have today to use technology to personally connect in real time with dispersed employees.

Creating the reward and recognition program

Realize that employees at other locations or who telecommute from their homes already feel they are second-class citizens. They imagine they are the last to hear about changes and news in the organization. Be empathetic with employees who do not work full time at the main office and duplicate any form of communication, recognition, or celebration that is done at the central office. I know of one employee in a field office who reported receiving a check from corporate for \$1.18 on his birthday—the cost equivalent to two movie tickets bought in bulk and distributed to employees at the home office.

With any reward and recognition program, managers must be sure to reward the behavior they desire with recognition that is valued and meaningful to their employees—not themselves. This is especially true when designing the virtual reward and recognition program because the state of being virtual brings a whole new set of issues to bear that need to be identified and addressed in the plan.

So in creating a recognition program, a more excited, energized, and productive managers should start with the motivational staff. needs of their employees and build from there. Ask virtual employees what they want! This can be done in one-on-one discussions or by other techniques, such as sending an employee an index card to list items they find motivating, as they do at BankBoston in Boston, Mass. One financial analyst there told me that he listed “time off,” “lunch with his manager,” and “Starbucks coffee” on his index card, returned it to his manager, and forgot about it. He was elated, however, a month or so later when he finished a project and was given a coupon for a Starbucks coffee with a personal note of thanks from his manager. The fact that a manager took the time to find out what would be meaningful and then used that information in a timely way left quite an impression.

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You can use simple survey techniques to find out what is important to your employees. Or you can ask everyone to share two items they find motivating at an upcoming meeting—in person or on-line. As you involve those you are trying to motivate, not only are you likely to be more on the mark, but others will more likely take ownership of the recognition program or activities. Discuss whether people would like more recognition and, if so, what form it should take. Ask who in the group would like to help get some new forms of recognition going. Involvement equals commitment. Today, the best management is what you do with others, not to them.

Managers have to work hard to help all employees feel integral to their jobs. Keeping virtual employees motivated to do their best is a very achievable task if done with the right focus at the right time. Take the time and the effort to recognize all your employees and you will reap the rewards of