xceleration
Rewarding Works®

A 2026 STUDY OF U.S. EMPLOYEES AND PEOPLE LEADERS

Recognition Disconnect

What employees actually want from recognition, and why most programs are missing it.

Leaders Think Recognition is Working. Employees Feel Otherwise.

32% of employees vs **54%** of HR leaders

feel their rewards deliver what actually matters to them. That gap holds on every measure we tested.

Companies spend heavily on recognition. But there's a clear gap between the people funding it and the people receiving it. What employees say they actually want isn't more money. It's recovery, personal attention, and time with the people they love. And once cash is off the table, one reward outperforms everything else on offer: individual, family-inclusive travel. It's chosen four times more often than the group trips companies typically offer, and rated highly by 70% of employees versus 48% for the average non-cash reward.

After cash, individual travel is the clear winner

70% individual travel

46% group trips

Share of employees who rate each reward highly on delivering what matters to them.

It's not just recognition. It's whether it lands personally.

82% fullest recognition

52% given less, or none

Intent to stay, comparing employees given the fullest top-performer recognition vs. those given less or none.

Recognition rarely feels personal — **48%**
say their recognition feels designed for them, not something everyone gets the same way.

People want recovery, not more reward — **76%**
rank rest, recovery, or time with loved ones among what a meaningful reward should give them.

The most burned out want travel most — **64%** vs 51%
rate a travel reward highly among employees with the strongest signs of burnout, vs. everyone else.

Recognition doesn't need a bigger budget. It needs a better answer to one question: What do people actually want? That's why we ran this study.

This study was commissioned by Xceleration on behalf of Luxury Concierge Travel and conducted independently by Dynata. We asked the people who design recognition and the people who receive it the same questions, so the gap between intention and experience could be measured directly, not assumed. Base: 686 U.S. full-time employees and people leaders, fielded June 2026, weighted toward mid-size and large employers. Differences called out as significant were tested at the 95% confidence level. Full methodology and sponsor detail on page 24.

→ SECTION 1

The Recognition Program is Running. The Reward Still Misses

On every measure of recognition rewards — value, personalization, emotional impact and even replenishment — HR leaders rate their efforts far higher than the employees receiving them do.

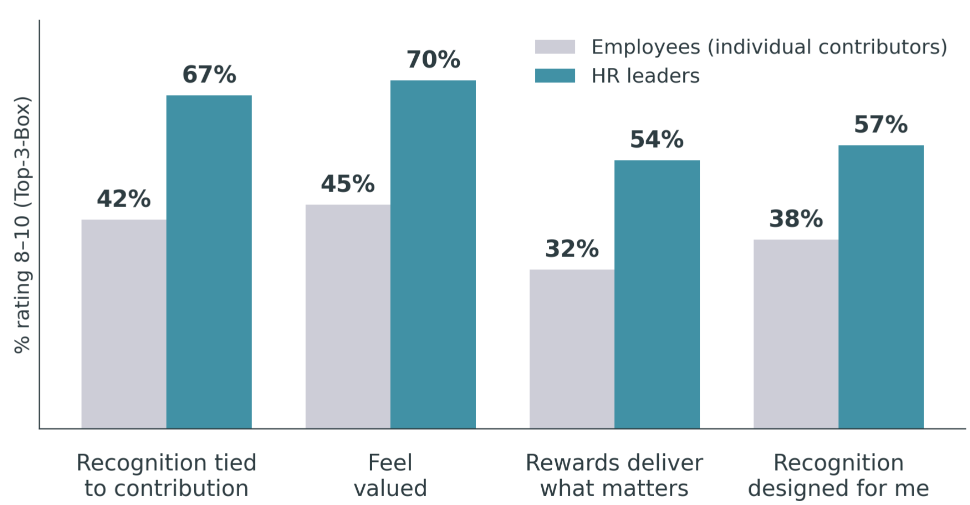
Companies of all sizes and in all industries invest heavily in recognizing and rewarding their people. SHRM recommends dedicating at least 1% of total payroll to recognition, and the highest-performing organizations often invest two to three times that to drive engagement and retention. The real question, then, is not whether these programs should exist, but whether that investment is producing its full return. Most of the HR leaders who run these programs believe it is. The employees on the receiving end are less convinced, and that gap, between what leaders fund and what employees feel, is where the return quietly leaks away.

This study set out to measure that gap directly, and to show what closes it. The reason it exists is rarely a lack of effort or care. It is a gap in visibility. Leaders see the program they fund and build. Employees feel the recognition they actually receive. Those are not the same picture.

We asked employees and people leaders the same set of questions. Is recognition tied to the value of what people contribute? Do people feel genuinely valued? Do the rewards on offer deliver what actually matters? Does recognition feel designed for the individual rather than handed to everyone? On every measure, leaders report a program that is working. Employees report less.

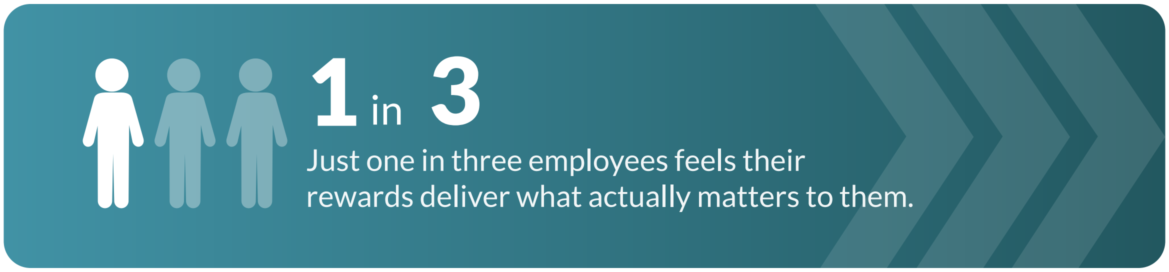
THE PATTERN

Lined up side by side, the gap is consistent and wide on every question. HR leaders, the people who design and deliver recognition, rate the experience far higher than the employees living it.



Top-3-Box (% rating 8–10), HR leaders versus individual contributors. The gap between the people who design recognition and the people who receive it holds across every measure (significant at 95%).

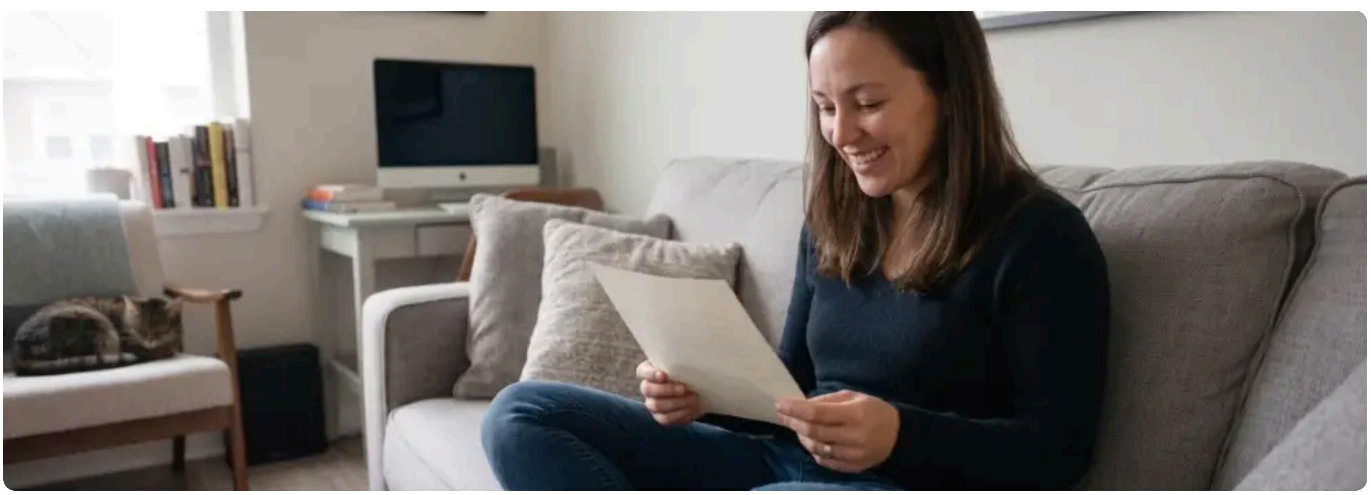
The widest gap is also the one that matters most. Asked whether rewards *deliver what actually matters* to people, 54% of HR leaders say yes, while only 32% of employees agree. The same shape holds for whether recognition is tied to contribution (67% of HR leaders versus 42% of employees) and whether it feels personal (57% versus 38%). This is not a knock on HR: they are closest to what the program delivers and have the clearest view of everything it sets out to do. What no one in their position can easily see is how any single reward actually lands for the person who receives it.



THE BLIND SPOT IN THE DASHBOARDS

This is easy to misread as leaders being out of touch. What it actually reflects is that the two groups are looking at different evidence. Leaders rate recognition highly because everything they can measure says the program is working: the budget approved, the platform launched, the participation rates, the awards given out. None of that captures whether any single reward actually landed for the person who received it. And that, whether it landed, is what shapes how valued an employee feels, how engaged they are, and whether they choose to stay.

Seen that way, the disconnect is not a failure of leadership. It is a gap in visibility. Leaders can see in detail how a program is delivered and almost nothing about how it is received. The employee data in this report supplies that second half. It does not contradict what leaders see; it adds what they have had no way to see.



Programs are measured in awards given. What decides the outcome is how one reward lands for one person.

RECOGNITION THAT FEELS LIKE EVERYONE ELSE'S

What employees are responding to is whether recognition feels like it was meant for them. The best recognition carries a clear message: we thought about you specifically, we noticed what you did, and this is yours because of it. It says, today is about you. That feeling, of being singled out rather than processed, is where most of the impact of recognition actually lives.

It is also where most programs fall short. Asked how much their recognition feels designed for them specifically rather than something everyone receives, fewer than half of employees (48%) say it feels personal. For the rest, recognition reads as generic: pleasant enough, but interchangeable, and easy to forget. Recognition that could have said "we see you" instead says "we processed you."

There is also the matter of how often recognition happens at all. For a meaningful share of the workforce, it is rare: one in four employees was last formally recognized more than a year ago, or never. That rarity does not lower the stakes on getting recognition right. It raises them. When the moments of recognition are this scarce, an organization has fewer chances to make them count, so the few it does deliver carry that much more weight.

When employees were last formally recognized.

> *HR leaders are not wrong about their programs. They are working from instruments that cannot read how recognition feels on the other side.*

This is the gap the rest of the report works to close. The chapters that follow show what employees are really asking recognition to do, which rewards deliver it, and what the organizations getting it right do differently. The opportunity is not a bigger budget. It is a better return on the budget already being spent, and the visibility to know where that return is and is not being earned.

Recognition investment benchmark: Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). Base: 686 employees and people leaders; the disconnect compares HR leaders, those who design and run recognition (the HR Manager and above cohort, n=259), with individual contributors (n=240). Differences between HR leaders and employees significant at 95% (Dynata BAN1). "Top-3-Box" = share rating 8–10 on a 10-point scale.

→ SECTION 2

The Reward Employees Actually Want, and Why Most Programs Still Miss It

68% pick cash when offered **$5,000**

But cash blends into the paycheck and the goodwill fades fast. What people actually want back is recovery and time.

Ask employees what reward they want and most will say cash. We tested this directly with a scenario we return to throughout the report: we asked each respondent to imagine their employer was giving them a $5,000 reward, and to choose the single form they would most want it in, cash or one of a range of non-cash alternatives. We call it the $5,000 decision. Most chose the cash, 68% of them. That is the expected answer, and it is worth understanding rather than dismissing, because it sits on top of a paradox the research has documented for decades: what people say they prefer and what actually moves them are often two different things.

THE PARADOX

Cash is the rational choice to name. It is flexible, it is universally useful, and it is the easiest reward to justify wanting. But that same flexibility is its weakness as recognition. Cash blends into the paycheck. It gets absorbed into the mortgage, the groceries, the bills, and the positive association with the employer fades almost immediately. The research literature has a name for this, mental accounting: a cash reward is filed alongside salary and spent like salary, so it is quickly forgotten.

Tangible and experiential rewards work differently. Because they sit outside the paycheck, they are remembered, talked about, and tied back to the company that gave them. Christopher Hsee's research helps explain why people often will not choose the luxury or experience they would most enjoy, defaulting instead to the option that is easier to justify. Scott Jeffrey's work shows why an employer-provided reward escapes that trap: because someone else grants it, it removes the guilt of the indulgence, and people work harder for it even while saying they would prefer the cash. Cash is what people choose. Experiences are what they remember.

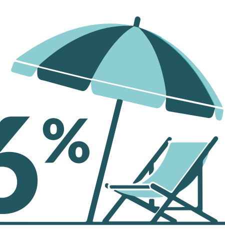
THE REAL PURPOSE OF A REWARD

That is why the more revealing question is not which reward people would take, but what they want a reward to do for them. Here the answers turn sharply away from money as an end in itself.

What employees say a meaningful reward should do for them (% ranking in their top three).

Financial relief still leads as a single item, named by 72%, which is consistent with people naming cash, and it is why we treat cash as table stakes rather than the story. But look at the two highlighted bars. They point to the same underlying need: one is protected time to rest and recover (53%), the other is time with the people they love (42%). Because each respondent named only their top three, many ranked both of these, so the two figures cannot simply be added together. Counted as a single theme, the share of employees who put rest, recovery, or time with loved ones in their top three reaches 76%. Taken together, that puts recovery and connection ahead of financial relief itself, the single item that otherwise tops the list. People are not asking recognition to make them richer. They are asking it to give them back something the work takes out of them.

76%



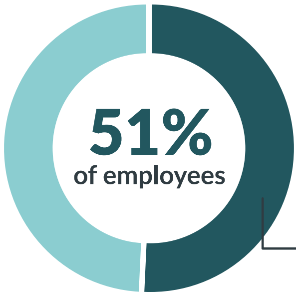
Rank **rest, recovery, or time** with the people they love among what a meaningful reward should give them.

This sets up the question the next section answers. If what people most want from a reward is recovery and time, and if the rewards that last are the ones that live outside the paycheck, then the most powerful reward is the one that delivers both at once. Section 4 shows which reward employees say does that.

Base: 686 employees and people leaders. The 76% is a net: the share of employees ranking protected time to rest and recover, time with loved ones, or both, in their top three; because respondents each chose three items, the two figures do not sum. Research cited: Jeffrey (2002, 2009); Hsee (1999); mental-accounting findings summarized in the Incentive Research Foundation literature.

→ SECTION 3

Half the Workforce Is Running on Empty

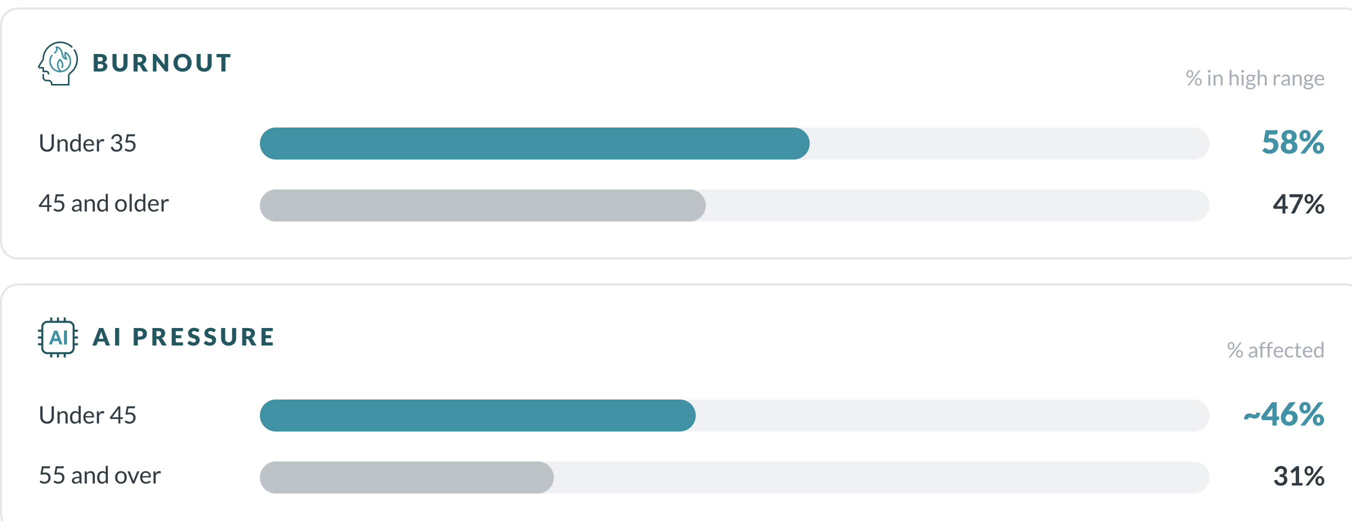


show strong signs of burnout, concentrated hardest in the employees companies can least afford to lose.

Roughly one in two, and weighted toward top contributors.

Section 2 showed what people most want from a reward: recovery and time. This section explains why that want is so important right now. The workforce in this study is running low, and the rest it gets is not the rest it needs.

Share of employees in the high range for burnout and AI pressure, by age.



Burnout is not a fringe condition in this data. We measured it with an eight-item index that captures how strongly people are currently affected by the pressures known to drive it: workload and pace, the expectation to always be available, the pressure to keep up with AI, too little genuine recovery, and a sense of being under-recognized. The average employee sits near the midpoint of that scale, and 51% land in the upper half, the group we describe here as showing strong signs of burnout. More than four in ten employees (42%) say an AI-related pressure, the rush to adopt new tools or uncertainty about how AI will reshape their role, is significantly affecting them right now. For a meaningful share of the workforce, the technology meant to lighten the load has itself become a source of strain.

This strain is not spread evenly; it falls hardest on younger employees. Burnout runs highest among those under 35, where 58% land in the high range, against 47% of employees 45 and older. AI pressure shows the same tilt, weighing on roughly 46% of employees under 45 but only 31% of those 55 and over. The people earliest in their careers are carrying the most of what this section describes.

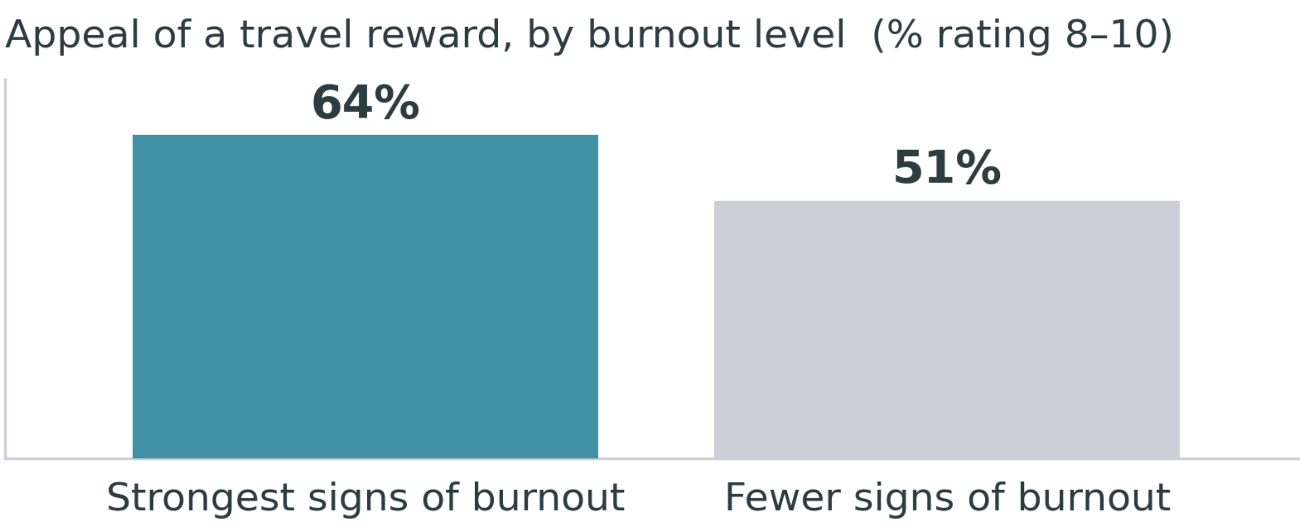
That pattern carries a forward-looking cost. As the most experienced part of the workforce retires over the next several years, organizations will lean harder on precisely the group that carries the most burnout and the most AI-related pressure today. Named now, it is a retention and knowledge-transfer risk that can be planned for. Left unnamed, it is the kind of problem that surfaces only once the experienced bench is already gone.

More telling is how few people get the recovery they need. Only about three in ten employees feel they regularly get genuine time to disconnect from work and recover, which means roughly seven in ten do not. For most of the workforce, real recovery is the exception rather than the rule.

Recovery is not the same as time off. It is time that is genuinely unreachable.

THE PEOPLE MOST DRAWN TO TRAVEL ARE THE MOST DEPLETED

The intuitive assumption is that people running on empty want to be left alone, or simply want cash. The data says the opposite. We asked directly how appealing a travel reward would be, and the appeal runs highest among the employees most affected by these pressures, not lowest.



How appealing employees find a travel reward, by burnout level (% rating 8–10). Appeal is highest among those most affected by these pressures.

Among the employees scoring highest on that index, 64% rate a travel reward highly, against 51% of the rest. The people with the least left in the tank are the ones reaching hardest for the kind of reward that might refill it. Travel is not a prize reserved for the energized few who win the trip. It is what the depleted majority say they most need.

TIME OFF IS NOT THE SAME AS RECOVERY

There is a subtler finding underneath this, and it matters for how recovery actually gets delivered. In this data, how high someone scores on that burnout index has almost no relationship to how much time off they technically get. The two move independently. People can be using their paid time off and still be depleted, because ordinary time off gets absorbed by life: the errands, the catch-up, the phone that never fully goes quiet.

That is the gap between time off and genuine recovery. A reward that books the trip, removes the planning, and creates a real reason to be unreachable does something a block of unstructured PTO often cannot. It produces actual disconnection. For an organization trying to help its most valuable and most exhausted people recover, the form of the reward is not a detail. It decides whether recovery actually happens, which leads directly to the question the next section answers: of all the rewards available, which one delivers that recovery best.

Base: 686 employees and people leaders; recovery-frequency figures reflect the individual-contributor cohort (n=240), the workforce read used for employee-experience measures. Recovery measured on a 1–10 scale (1 = almost never, 10 = very regularly); "regularly" denotes a rating of 8–10, the report's Top-3-Box convention. Burnout is an index of how strongly respondents are currently affected by eight workplace pressures, each rated 1–10; the higher-burnout group is the upper half of that index. The AI-pressure figure is the share rating either AI-related item, the pressure to adopt AI tools quickly or uncertainty about how AI will reshape one's role, an 8 or higher. Travel appeal is measured by a direct question on how appealing a travel reward is to the respondent personally; the difference by burnout level is significant at 95% (Dynata BAN2). Age-band differences reflect the full sample and are directional.

→ SECTION 4

After Cash, One Reward Wins — and It's Not the One Companies Keep Offering

What Employees Want

Individual, family-inclusive travel beats every other non-cash reward on what people choose and what delivers.

VS

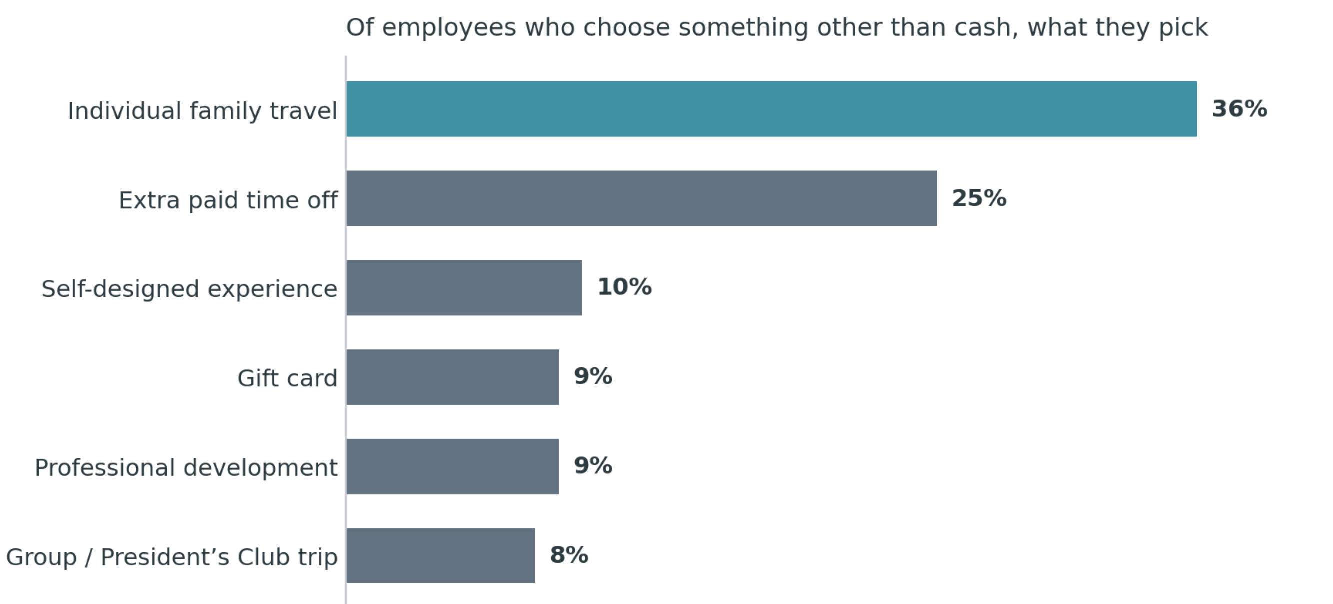
What Employees Get

While the **group trip** the industry offers most underperforms.

For the companies and leaders who want to move past table-stakes rewards to the ones that carry real trophy value, the experiences people remember, talk about, and associate with their employer, the data is unusually clear. After cash, the reward that wins is individual, family-inclusive travel. It wins on two separate measures that point the same way: what people choose, and what they say delivers.

THE CHOICE EMPLOYEES MAKE INSTEAD OF CASH

About a third of employees pass on the cash in the $5,000 decision. Where that third goes instead is the more useful question, and the chart below answers it.



Among employees who choose a non-cash reward in the $5,000 decision, the share selecting each option.

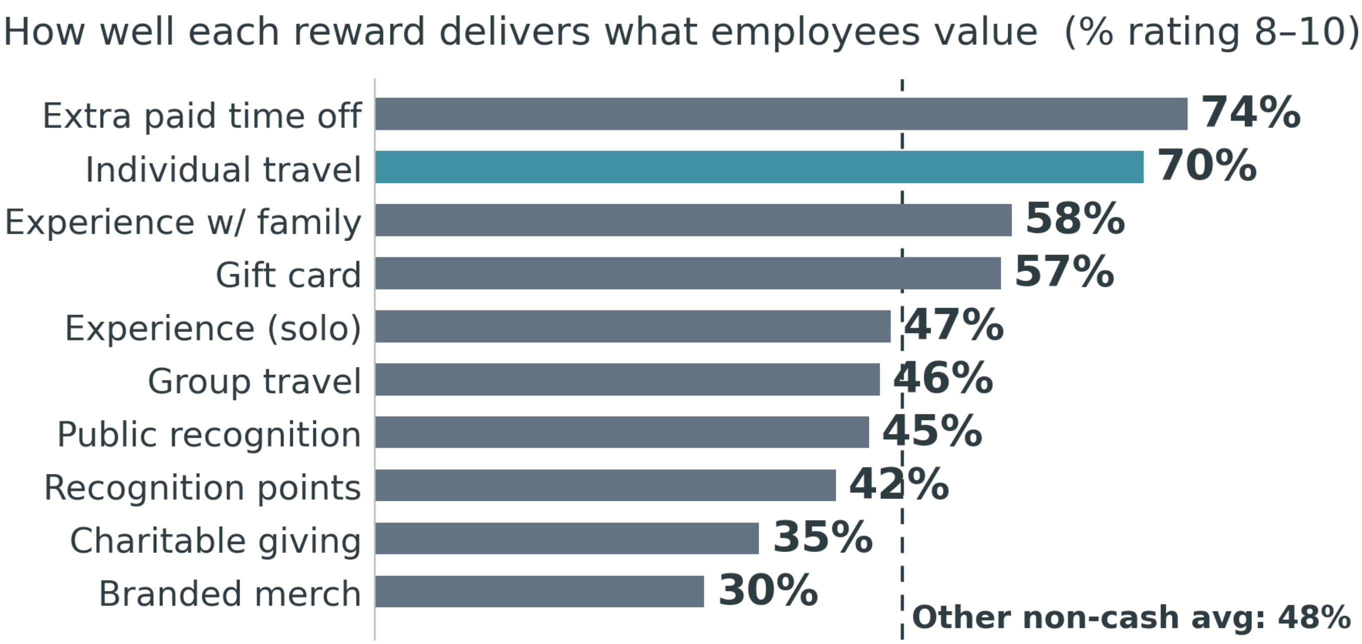
Among everyone who turns down the cash, individual family travel is the runaway first choice at 36%, ahead of extra time off (25%), and more than gift cards, self-designed experiences, professional development, and group trips combined. When people stop reaching for the safe, fungible option, travel is what they reach for instead. This is the first of the study's two headline findings.

Individual Family Travel

36% most-chosen non-cash reward, picked by 36% of everyone who turns down the cash.

DELIVERED VALUE, BY REWARD TYPE

Preference is one lens. Delivered value is the other. We asked how well each type of reward delivers what employees actually care about. Setting cash aside as the default, individual travel sits at the top of the field, ahead of every other reward type by a clear margin.



How well each reward delivers what employees value (% rating 8–10). Cash is excluded; the dashed line marks the average of the other non-cash rewards (48%).

70% of employees rate individual travel highly on delivering what matters to them, against an average of 48% across the other non-cash rewards. It clears the options most programs lean on, gift cards, recognition points, public recognition, charitable giving, and branded merchandise, by a wide margin. Only extra paid time off, at 74%, rates higher, a point we return to below. Among the rewards a program actually designs and delivers, individual travel is the one that lands highest. This is the second headline finding.

1.5x

Individual travel out-delivers the average of the other non-cash rewards: **70% rate it highly, versus 48%.**

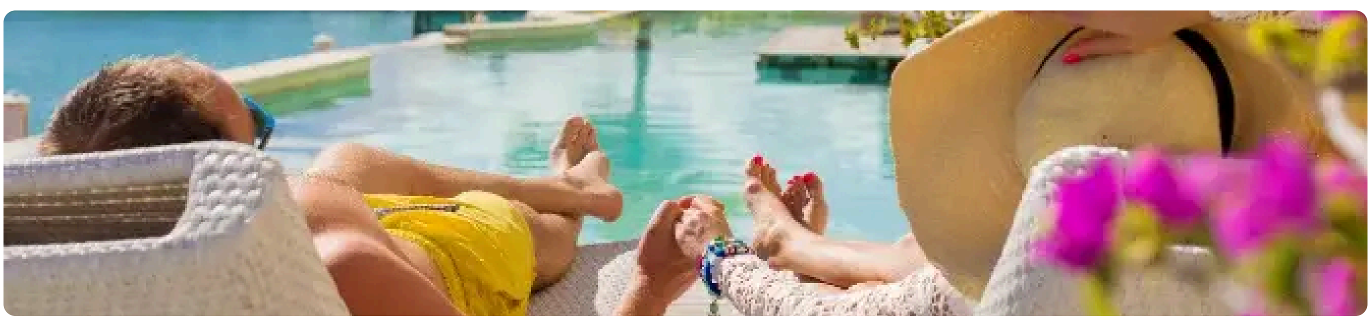
The appeal is not uniform across industries, and one sector stands out. In healthcare, 86% of employees rate an individual travel reward highly, the strongest figure of any industry in the study and well above the 70% all-employee average. For a sector under chronic retention pressure, that points to a reward that would genuinely land.

Extra paid time off rates a shade higher than travel on this measure, and that is not a problem for the argument. It is the heart of it. What people want most is recovery and time. Travel is the one employer-delivered reward that provides both, wrapped in an experience they could not easily justify buying for themselves. Time off restores. Travel restores and carries trophy value: it is remembered, it is talked about, and it attaches that memory to the company that made it possible.

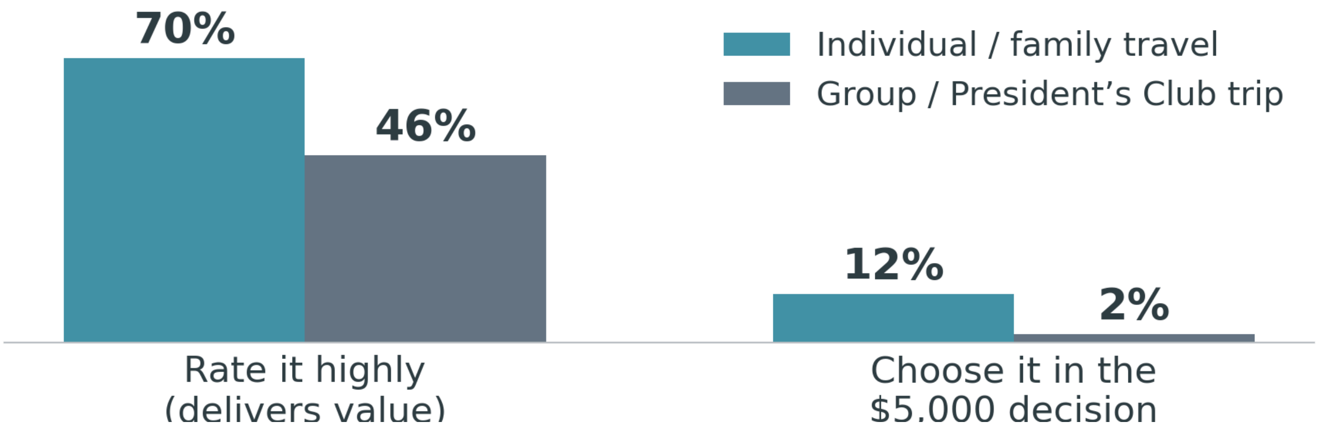
There is a second reason individual travel lands, and it reaches back to the gap this report opened with. Earlier we saw that fewer than half of employees feel their recognition is designed for them rather than handed to everyone. Individual travel is the rare reward that cannot feel generic. A trip taken with your own family, on your own terms, built around what you would actually want, is by its nature yours and no one else's. Where a gift card or a points balance or a companywide perk can say "we processed you," a trip shaped around one person says "we thought about you specifically." That is what makes it unusual: it answers both of the things employees told us, in different parts of this study, they most want and most often find missing, genuine recovery and the sense of being recognized as an individual.

THE PART THE INDUSTRY GETS BACKWARD

One distinction matters more than any other for how recognition budgets get spent. The reward the incentive industry leans on hardest, the group trip, the President's Club, the whole team at a resort, is not the one employees want. When the travel is theirs, taken with their own family on their own terms, it performs. When it comes packaged with colleagues, it does not.



Above, the reward employees choose. Below, the one the industry leans on hardest.



Individual versus group travel, on delivered value and on what people choose in the $5,000 decision.

Individual travel is rated highly by 70% of employees; the group trip, by 46%. And given the $5,000 decision, employees choose the individual trip far more often than the group one (12% versus 2%). The difference on delivered value is significant. This is the widest gap in the study between what companies routinely buy and what employees actually want, and it is the place where a different approach has the most room to win.

> *When the travel is theirs, it performs. When it comes packaged with colleagues, it does not. Employees choose the individual trip far more often.*

Together the two headline findings make a simple case, and it is a case about return rather than spend. After cash, individual travel is both the reward people most want and, among the rewards a program can design, the one that delivers the most of what they value, and the individual, family-inclusive form clearly outperforms the group model the market defaults to. For an organization already spending on travel and experiences, the question is not whether to invest, but whether the dollars are flowing to the form that actually drives engagement and retention.

Base: 686 employees and people leaders; $5,000 decision and reward-value ratings from the full sample. Individual-versus-group difference significant at 95% (Dynata BAN1). The healthcare industry figure (n=78) is significant at 95% against all other sectors. The $5,000 figure reflects the value tested in the survey.

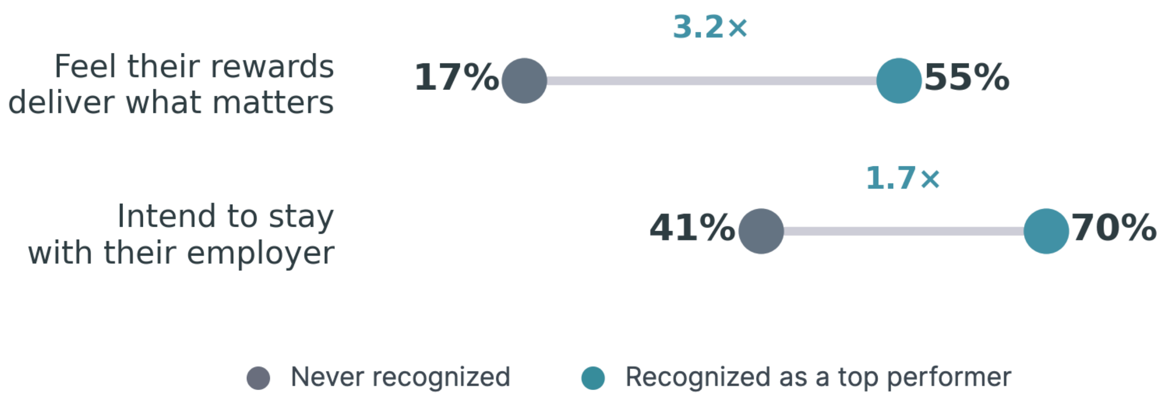
→ SECTION 5

Meaningful Recognition Keeps People. Generic Recognition Doesn't.

Employees who feel meaningfully recognized are 70% likely to stay, versus 41% of those who don't.

Recognition is often treated as a soft benefit, the kind of thing that is nice to do when budgets allow. The data argues it is closer to a retention lever, and a measurable one. This is where the investment earns its return. The difference between recognition that lands and recognition that does not shows up directly in how people feel about staying, which is the outcome the entire investment is ultimately trying to protect.

Recognition that lands changes outcomes (% rating 8–10)



Employees recognized as top performers, versus those never recognized, on whether their rewards deliver what matters and on intent to stay (significant at 95%).

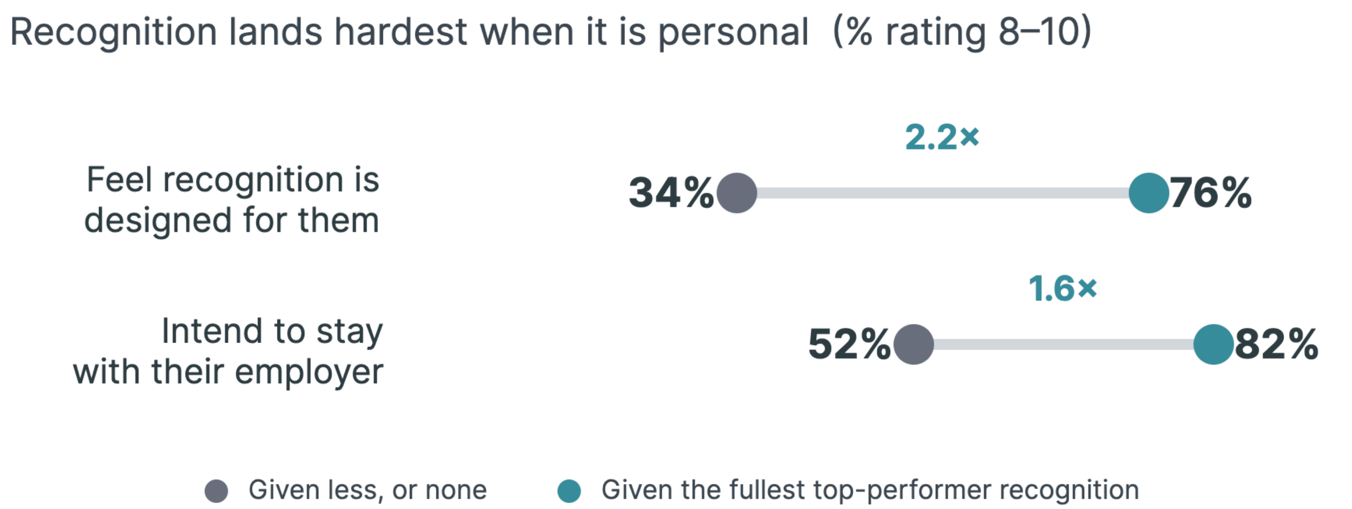
Employees who have been meaningfully recognized as top performers are dramatically more positive than those who have not. They are more than three times as likely to feel their rewards deliver what matters (55% versus 17%), and far likelier to intend to stay (70% versus 41%).

70% vs 41%

Intent to stay among employees who have been meaningfully recognized, versus those who have not.

AND IT LANDS HARDEST WHEN IT IS PERSONAL

The effect is strongest among the employees given the fullest top-performer recognition. This group posts the strongest figures in the study, both on feeling their recognition was designed for them and on intending to stay.



Employees given the fullest top-performer recognition, versus those given less or none, on feeling recognition is designed for them and on intent to stay (significant at 95%).

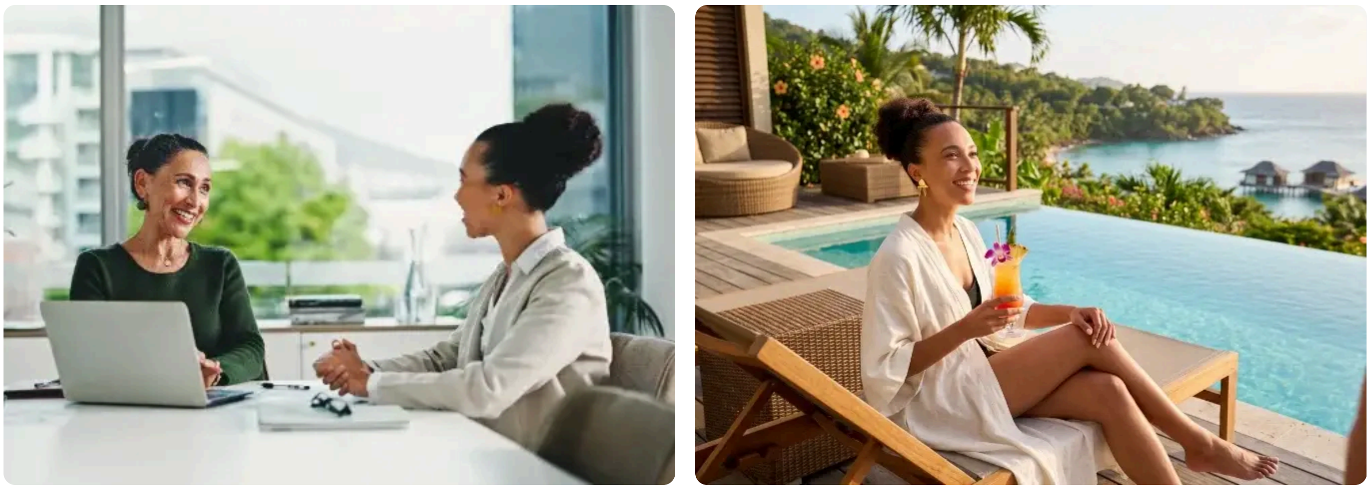
The lesson is about how recognition is delivered, not which reward is booked. Recognition lands hardest when the person receiving it feels it was meant for them specifically, the same quality that sets individual rewards apart from group ones. The strongest, most personal recognition produces the strongest reason to stay.

The direction of cause runs both ways, and it would be overclaiming to say recognition alone produces retention. But the published research points the same way the survey does. Effective recognition programs are associated with materially lower voluntary turnover, while cash-only approaches tend to create a treadmill, where the reward has to grow each year just to hold the same effect. Recognition that is personal and memorable does not wear off the same way.

THE STAKES IN 2026

There is a reason this lands harder in 2026 than it would have a few years ago. As automation and AI absorb more of the routine work, the value a person brings shifts toward the things software cannot replicate: judgment, relationships, institutional knowledge, trust. Those are exactly the people an organization can least afford to lose, and exactly the people generic recognition fails to reach.

Recognition, done well, is how an organization signals to its most valuable people that they are seen as more than a function.



The people an organization can least afford to lose are the ones generic recognition fails to reach.

Base: 686 employees and people leaders. Comparisons split employees recognized as top performers against those never recognized, and employees who have received a top-performer recognition trip, the fullest recognition experience captured in the study, against those who have not; both sets of differences are significant at 95% (Dynata BAN2). Retention research summarized from Incentive Research Foundation and Bersin sources; AI framing is contextual, not a survey measure.

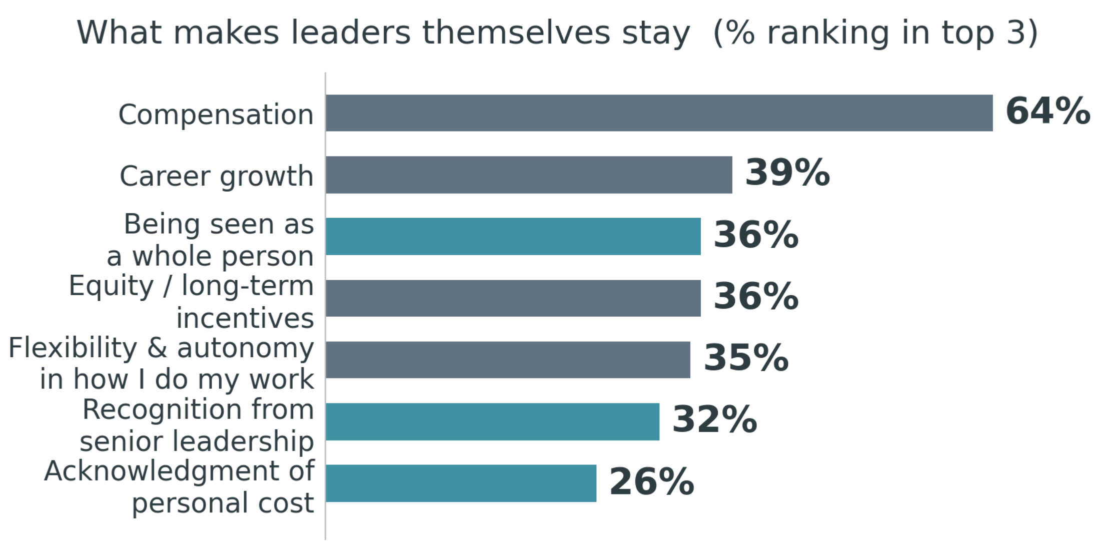
→ SECTION 6

Leaders Want the Same Thing They're Not Giving

Compensation still leads, but being seen as a whole person ranks right alongside equity, and a third of leaders say recognition never reaches their family.

Until this point, the report has looked through a single lens: the employee experience. We have seen how individual contributors experience their recognition, and how much more favorably the leaders who design it rate the very same things. But we also turned the lens around and asked leaders about themselves, not as the people who run recognition, but as people who are recognized, or are not, by the organizations they serve. Their answers are just as revealing as the gap we opened with, and they point in the same direction. It begins with what they told us about their own loyalty.

When we asked leaders what makes them, personally, want to stay with an organization, compensation led, as it usually does. But just beneath it sat a cluster of relational drivers: being acknowledged for the personal cost of the work, recognition from senior leadership, and being seen as a whole person rather than a role.



What leaders say makes them want to stay (% ranking in their top three).

Compensation leads at 64%. After that, no single lever dominates. Equity and long-term incentives sit at 36%, level with the strongest relational driver, being seen as a whole person (36%), and just behind investment in growth and development (39%). Recognition from senior leadership (32%) and acknowledgment of the personal cost the role carries (26%) follow close behind. Counted as a cluster, though, the three relational drivers carry real weight together: 72% of leaders rank at least one of them among their top three reasons to stay. Leaders want for themselves what the employee data says everyone wants: to be seen as a person. Yet a third of leaders say recognition rarely or never extends to their family, the part of life the work most often costs them.

This has a direct implication for how total rewards, and executive compensation in particular, are designed. When leaders rank their own reasons to stay, relational drivers hold their own against the financial levers senior compensation leans on hardest: being seen as a whole person matches equity and long-term incentives item-for-item, both at 36%, and the relational drivers as a group are ranked by 72% of leaders. Individual, family-inclusive travel is not a perk that competes with equity. It is a direct answer to two things leaders say keep them: relational value and family inclusion. Treated as a designed component of the compensation package rather than a discretionary add-on, it speaks to a set of drivers leaders rate as highly as the financial ones, and that most companies currently underuse.

Recognition also thins out in the middle of the leadership ranks. The most senior leaders, at the VP and C-suite level, are the most likely to feel valued (78%) and to feel their recognition is designed for them (68%).

> *Mid-level leaders, who carry much of the day-to-day weight, report markedly less. The people doing the connective work of an organization are often the least likely to feel personally seen for it.*

THE TWO-PART CONCLUSION

The path forward follows directly from the findings, in two steps.

First, the broad one. Recognition done right is among the most cost-effective levers an organization has for engagement and retention. The gap this report opens with is not closed by spending more. It is closed by redirecting the investment already being made toward what is personal, toward acknowledging the whole person, and toward building the visibility to know whether it is landing.

The goal is a better return on the same recognition dollar.

Second, the specific one. When the question turns to which reward carries the most impact once cash is accounted for, the evidence converges on one answer: individual, family-inclusive travel. It is what people choose, what delivers the most among the rewards a program can design, and the form that decisively outperforms the group model. For an organization deciding where a recognition dollar will do the most, that is where the data points.

On the sales side, the picture is consistent. Cash and incentives still drive the quarter, as they should. But about a third of sales leaders are not confident their current mix actually retains their best reps, which is precisely the gap relational, experiential recognition is built to fill.

Base: 446 people leaders; 187 sales leaders. The 72% is a net: the share of leaders ranking any of the three relational drivers, being seen as a whole person, recognition from senior leadership, or acknowledgment of the personal cost of the role, among their top three; because each leader ranked three items, the individual figures do not sum. Leader loyalty drivers from question L7; family-inclusion from L8; sales confidence from MS2.

→ SECTION 7

Methodology

The study was fielded online in June 2026 among 705 U.S. full-time employees and people leaders, with 686 retained after data-quality screening. Respondents span organizations of all sizes, weighted toward mid-size and large employers: 64% are at companies of 250 or more employees, and 46% at 500 or more. The sample includes three groups: individual contributors (240), HR and people leaders (259), and sales leaders (187).

Headline metrics are reported as Top-3-Box, the share of respondents rating an item 8 to 10 on a 10-point scale. Differences described as significant were tested at the 95% confidence level using two banner analyses: the first across cohort, gender, age, company size, and region; the second across President's Club attendance, top-performer recognition, and burnout level. Generational groupings are shown for completeness, but the youngest band is small and no finding rests on a generational read.

Throughout, workforce figures are reported using the individual-contributor cohort, since the full sample includes a higher proportion of leaders than the general workforce. Where the report draws on prior research, sources are noted in context.

A note on generation: the core findings here hold across age groups. The desire for recognition that feels personal, the pull toward recovery and travel, and the intent to stay when recognition lands varied little between younger and older employees. What differs by age is the level of strain, since burnout and AI pressure concentrate among younger workers, rather than what people want recognition to be. These are workforce-wide patterns, not a generational preference.

About the Study

Recognition Disconnect was commissioned by Xceleration and conducted independently by Dynata, a global provider of first-party data and insights. The study surveyed 686 U.S. full-time employees and people leaders online in June 2026, including individual contributors, HR and people leaders, and sales leaders, weighted toward mid-size and large employers. Differences described as significant were tested at the 95% confidence level. Full methodology, the complete survey instrument, and topline results are available in the full report: **www.xceleration.com/recognition-disconnect/**

About Xceleration

For more than 25 years, Xceleration has helped organizations build cultures where people feel valued, connected, and inspired to perform at their best. As a leader in employee recognition and reward solutions, Xceleration partners with organizations of all sizes to design recognition strategies that strengthen engagement, improve retention, and reinforce organizational values. As part of their global reward solution, Xceleration manages individual, concierge-planned travel experiences through their Luxury Concierge Travel “Moments” product. Each award is planned end-to-end for the achiever and their loved ones, with flights, accommodations, and 24/7 travel support. Developed by Xceleration, Moments is built for organizations looking to turn recognition spending into lasting impact.

About Dynata

This study was conducted in partnership with Dynata, a leading global provider of first-party data and insights. Dynata’s large, permission-based panel enables precise targeting and representative sampling across key audiences. Data collection adheres to strict quality controls including fraud detection, digital fingerprinting, and real-time validation to ensure reliable, high-integrity results.

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