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AN HR & EMPLOYEE BENEFITS NEWSLETTER

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Welcome to the UBA Partner Firm exclusive monthly newsletter, delivering insights into timely human resources and employee benefits topics.

November 2025

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Employee Benefits | Going Beyond Gift Cards

As the year ends, employers are taking a closer look at how they thank employees in a meaningful way. Gift cards remain a common option, but many leaders are questioning whether they truly convey appreciation or merely fulfill an annual expectation. Rising employee stress levels, evolving work arrangements, and changing personal needs are reshaping what “recognition” should look like.

The Challenge: Connection That Feels Real

Many traditional gestures miss the context of employees’ daily lives. Packed schedules, caregiving duties, and ongoing financial pressure influence how recognition is received.

[Work-life balance has now surpassed pay as the top priority for employees, with 83% of people surveyed indicating that time and flexibility often take precedence over financial perks.](#)

As employees juggle both personal and professional responsibilities, generic gifts can fall flat. Instead, recognition that supports well-being, such as an extra personal day, a well-being stipend, or time to decompress after a demanding period, carries a stronger message of care.

The Pressure Point: One-Size-Fits-All Gifts

Teams today are a mix of remote, hybrid, and on-site roles, each with distinct needs and day-to-day challenges. A single gift may be convenient to distribute, but it can easily feel misaligned with individual circumstances.

Differences in work styles also influence how employees like to be acknowledged. Some prefer tangible items, others value time, and many appreciate personalized thanks from leadership.

These variations highlight why overly uniform recognition can feel impersonal and why offering options provides a better chance of meeting employees where they are.

The Strategy: Align Recognition with Well-Being

Employers don't need large budgets to make recognition meaningful. Small efforts, such as a leadership message that reflects the year's experiences or a donation to a cause an employee supports, can have a strong impact.

Gestures that promote well-being reinforce the message that employees are valued for more than their output. Allowing teams to select from a range of recognition options also ensures that the gesture feels relevant, whether it supports rest, financial relief, or personal interests.

These efforts create a more thoughtful experience, helping employees enter the new year with a renewed sense of trust and motivation.

The Opportunity: Engagement Through Appreciation

Recognition that acknowledges real needs encourages employees to stay engaged and connected. Clear communication, genuine appreciation, and flexible recognition options help employees feel valued and supported.

When employees understand that appreciation reflects their lived experience, rather than a generic token, they respond with stronger morale, higher participation, and a deeper commitment to the organization.

Gift cards are convenient, but meaningful appreciation goes farther. Employers that invest in thoughtful, flexible recognition strengthen both connection and loyalty. By aligning year-end gestures with employee well-being, daily pressures, and individual preferences, organizations close the year on a personal note, continuing to attract and retain top talent.

Workplace Culture | Rethinking the Holiday Party

For years, the holiday party symbolized togetherness. However, as workplaces become increasingly distributed and diverse, HR leaders are reevaluating how celebrations fit into today's culture. Connection doesn't require a ballroom; it requires intention.

The Shift: From Event to Experience

Large events can alienate as easily as they engage. Employees appreciate time together, but prefer flexible, low-pressure options that honor their schedules and comfort levels.

[You don't need grand events or big bonuses to make people feel valued.](#)

Consistent, everyday recognition builds a stronger connection than any once-a-year celebration. A season of small, inclusive touchpoints, such as team lunches, volunteer days, or lighthearted virtual activities, invites genuine participation and builds a sense of belonging across geographies.

Where Culture Strengthens

When celebrations are optional and inclusive, participation becomes about connection, not compliance. The tone shifts from “attendance required” to “you’re welcome here,” ensuring no one feels overlooked or pressured.

Practical Ways to Celebrate Differently

Offer variety and flexibility: local coffee meetups, hybrid trivia sessions, or charitable drives. Encourage managers to share gratitude through short, specific acknowledgments. Keep budgets moderate and focus on authenticity over extravagance.

By reframing year-end gatherings as moments of gratitude and community, employers close the year with unity instead of fatigue—and enter the next one with renewed trust and connection, thereby retaining and attracting top talent.

Dear HR Manager | Offering Flexibility during the Holidays

How can I give my team the flexibility they need during the holidays while also meeting fourth-quarter goals?

— *Concerned Team Leader*

Dear Concerned,

You’re not alone in facing that dilemma. The final stretch of the year brings high expectations, limited time, and competing personal priorities. The key is to strike a balance between structure and empathy, clear goals supported by genuine flexibility.

[Flexibility has become one of the most powerful drivers of workforce engagement and retention.](#)

Clarify Priorities Early

Distinguish between what must be completed by year-end and what can be delayed. A shared understanding of non-negotiables helps everyone plan their time realistically.

Define Flexibility by Outcomes

Rather than focusing on hours, focus on deliverables. Allow employees to coordinate their own schedules and communicate coverage. Brief, purposeful check-ins maintain accountability without overwhelming calendars.

Model the Balance

Set the tone by taking your own time off and respecting boundaries. When leaders model balance, teams feel permission to do the same.

Support the Whole Person

Recognize that flexibility isn't just about hours, it's about trust. Encourage employees to recharge, attend family commitments, and return focused. Meeting goals while honoring life outside of work builds loyalty that lasts well beyond the end of the year.

— *HR Manager*

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