

Employee recognition ideas: 52 epic ways to give rewards

Recognition makes people feel really good about themselves. It also motivates employees to keep up the good work. Positive reinforcement sets an example for everyone in your organization, showing them the kind of work you value most.

And it doesn't have to be an elaborate event. Here are 52 employee recognition ideas you can start using today.

1. CEO for the day

Let an employee be "CEO for the Day" and proclaim a jeans day, potluck or make a speech at a team meeting.

2. Lunch with the boss

Take your employees out to lunch and let them choose the location. Do your best to keep work related discussions to a minimum. Take this time to get to know more about what your employee's interests and hobbies are beyond their work lives.

3. Team shopping spree

If you hit a number-based milestone, such as a sales goal, take that number and use it as the basis for a celebration. Take everyone to the shopping complex. Give each employee a certain amount of money with these rules: you have a certain amount of minutes to spend as much of the money as possible and you must spend the money on yourself (not kids, not a spouse – nobody but yourself). Have them meet you in the middle of the shopping complex when time is up for a show-and-tell about what they bought.

4. Acts-of-service auction

At an employee appreciation dinner or company party, give everyone play money to use at an auction. The auction items should be small, personal things the management team will do for the winning bidder: wash cars, cook a meal, bake a cake, doing the employee's job for 6 hours, baby-sitting, etc.

5. Themed team lunch

Host a company lunch break, possibly themed, held outdoors (cookout or picnic) or formalised with nice linen on the tables.

6. Company apparel

Who doesn't love a free t-shirt or ball cap? Offering employees free company apparel and other logo merchandise can be a simple, inexpensive way to say, 'thank you'.

7. Gala guests

If your group has a relationship with a particular charity, buy a couple of tickets to their next lunch or dinner event and allow your employees to attend. Those events are always fun, and it provides them with a new experience.

8. Team service project

Organise a community volunteer activity. To make it even more rewarding, consider letting your employees choose the organization/event.

9. 'Thank you' meeting

Call an employee into your office to just say thanks. It's most impactful if you simply say thanks for a particular thing and nothing else. Don't discuss other issues; only talk about the good work.

10. Certificate of achievement

Present a certificate in honor of a specific achievement.

11. Recognition in front of peers

Highlight your employees' achievements by recognizing them in a company meeting, newsletter or on your company Intranet site.

12. Jeans day

Give out coupons that allow employees to wear jeans on a day of their choosing, or designate an all-employee jeans day.

13. VIP parking spot

Give an exemplary employee a dedicated parking space for a week or month.

14. Spot awards

When you see employees do something right, give them a (small dollar amount) gift card on the spot. You could also give tickets to a sporting or performing arts event. And to make it more affordable, you can purchase gift cards from discount websites, such as Living Social, Groupon, Restaurant.com, etc., or buy them from a warehouse, such as Costco.

15. Hand-written note

A personal note written with sincerity and specifics can sometimes mean the most to an employee. Money or trinkets may never be as rewarding.

16. Impromptu time off

Spontaneous late arrival or early departure days are always a motivator. For example, send a quick email that says, "It's a beautiful afternoon. Go enjoy it."

17. Time off coupons

Give out coupons for 15 minutes of time off as a spot award. Employees can collect them to add up to leaving an hour early one day or coming in late one day.

18. Work-from-home day

Remember significant events in your employees' personal lives, such as a child starting kindergarten, and give them a work-from-home day so they can participate without worrying about coming into the office on time.

19. Breakfast treat

Know your employees' favorite morning treat and show up with it – coffee, Diet Coke, breakfast tacos, donuts, etc.

20. Indoor food truck

On a hot day, have the leadership team go around the office with a cart handing out ice cream (e.g., Klondike bars, ice cream sandwiches, etc.). On a cold day, have them push around a "Cocoa Cart," serving hot chocolate to the team.

21. Peer-to-peer recognition

Develop a peer recognition program that lets employees give each other on-the-spot accolades on a community bulletin board or internal website. This allows employees to recognize their peers directly. Each month, the employees receiving awards could be entered into a drawing for a gift card or other award.

22. Team birthdays and work anniversaries

Make employees feel special on their big day. Host a team lunch, throw a small party, pass out cupcakes – there are many simple ways to let them know you care.

23. Points reward system

Develop a points system for a reward program. This provides a perfect platform for ongoing recognition. Employees receive points every time they go above and beyond. After accumulating a certain amount, employees can redeem their points for gifts. You could offer a variety of rewards for the employees to select from.

24. Coffee shop meetings

Hold your one-on-one meetings at a local coffee shop so it's casual and relaxed. As a little treat, pay for your employees' drinks. For remote employees, send them online Starbucks gift cards and then Facetime/Skype with them from the coffee shop.

25. Employee competitions

Incorporate some fun, healthy competition into the workplace – such as college football team brackets – and award the winner.

26. Family invites

Invite employees' families to company celebrations.

27. Bring-your-dog day

Allow employees to bring their dog to work occasionally.

28. Special projects

Give your employees an opportunity to work on special projects beyond their regular responsibilities. Doing this will allow them to grow, and will also demonstrate your confidence in their abilities to do a good job.

29. Cover a major expense

When an employee goes above and beyond in a truly significant fashion, you could pay for a major payment or purchase for that individual. This might be a mortgage payment, automobile payment or major home appliance. There are two key considerations for making this a success. First, the reward should be tied to a significant achievement that resulted in huge savings or brought in additional revenue. Second, you should communicate to the employee, as well as the rest of your staff, how this behaviour helped the organisation succeed or gives the company a competitive advantage.

30. Cookies for a cause

For an employee who's an active volunteer, have specially shaped cookies made and delivered with a thank you card. The shapes should reflect the cause the employee cares about. For instance, if the employee volunteers with military veterans, the cookies might be in the shapes of stars and flags.

31. Charitable donation

Find out what their favorite charity is and donate to it in their honor.

32. Summer fun in the office

Put on a season of "Summer Fun" from Memorial Day to Labor Day where everyone is in for a drawing of a sleep-in day, long lunch or early release. Each week winners are announced, and everyone usually "wins" something twice per summer.

33. Traveling trophy

Create a traveling trophy (e.g., golden object, special hat, figurine, etc.) that moves employee-to-employee based on being "caught" doing something outstanding.

34. Warm welcome

Set up a "Welcome to Work" station at the employee entrance with coffee, juice, donuts for the a.m. crew, or coffee, soda, cookies for the p.m. crew. Decorate the station with positive messages on signs (e.g., "Our employees are #1" or "Through these doors walk the world's greatest employees".)

35. Department recognition bulletin board

Recognize departments on a rotating basis. Each month a designated bulletin board highlights their contributions to the organization, the individual employees, their greatest achievements, etc.

36. Different dress code

Designate a day to change-up the dress code, e.g., casual clothes day, t-shirt day, silly hat day, Hawaiian dress day, etc.

37. Off-campus outing

Set up an off-site bowling, sporting, theatre or other event to recognize an entire department/work group (also good team building).

38. Post team achievements in break rooms

Post team results in common areas being sure to include the names of each member. It may be a chart or graph that shows positive improvement or it may be a simple description of a project that highlights the benefits to the organization.

39. Secret Santa-style appreciation

Use the "Secret Santa" concept. Have all employees draw a name of another employee. They would then identify an achievement/contribution particular to that person and send an anonymous note of appreciation.

40. Wall of fame

Create a "Wall of Fame." Post customer compliments, charts/graphs depicting positive progress, copies of certificates (e.g., training completed, awards, acknowledgment of achievement, etc.), peer-to-peer notes of thanks, etc.

41. Pay it forward

Develop a unique award that employees pass among each other as an expression of recognition.

42. Open house

Create an "Open House" in which employees can invite family/friends to visit their worksite and see what they do. In preparation for the "event," ask employees to display their accomplishments in creative ways.

43. T-Shirt design contest

Hold a contest to design a t-shirt that includes the company logo. The winning design is used on a t-shirt to be worn on a special day or for a special event.

44. Health fair

Sponsor a wellness fair to coincide with annual benefits enrollment.

45. Pleasant break room

Redecorate break rooms and continue to ensure they are clean and maintained regularly. Employees want to know the organization appreciates their hard work and are deserving of a quality space to rejuvenate.

46. Post-It praise

Randomly, post a thank-you note/letter of praise on an employee's office door/desk/work station/equipment.

47. Hidden praise

Hide several positive notes of personal praise around your employees' work area.

48. Brand-name thanks

Give employees a "branded" treat expressing appreciation, such as Life Savers, Kudos bars, Million Dollar bars, etc.

49. Ambassador assignment

Invite employees to represent their department at a meeting they typically would not attend. Have them report back to their team.

50. VIP meet-n-greet

Introduce an employee to the "VIPs" in your organization – this could be upper members of your management team or key customers. The message is "this is an important employee whom the VIP should know."

51. Educational investment

Sending an employee to a seminar/educational activity of interest to them gives the message that the company cares to invest in their personal development.

52. Praise from a customer

Ask customers or vendors to recognize employees who have contributed to their positive experience with the company by providing them with a card or unique item to present to the employee of their choice. The employee can then turn the item in for an additional award.