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A Contextual Recognition Model for Understanding Employee Motivation, Engagement, and Retention

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Abstract

Employee recognition is widely regarded as a valuable organizational resource, yet evidence suggests that identical recognition practices may be perceived as motivating by some employees and superficial or meaningless by others. This study developed a contextual recognition model to explain how employees interpreted, evaluated, and responded to workplace recognition. Using an interpretive qualitative research design, reflexive thematic analysis was conducted on 18 interview records collected from participants across diverse sectors, including public administration, banking, hospitality, technology, sales, and higher education. The interviews explored employees' experiences of appreciation and lack of appreciation, preferences for public versus private recognition, delayed feedback, helping behaviors, and trade-offs influencing retention decisions. The analysis generated six interconnected themes: (1) recognition was interpreted rather than uniformly received; (2) alignment among employee contributions, recognition sources, visibility, and forms influenced perceived credibility; (3) recognition operated as an ongoing process rather than merely an outcome; (4) relational credibility shaped the motivational significance of recognition; (5) structural congruence influenced the perceived authenticity of recognition; and (6) retention decisions reflected multiple threshold-based trade-offs rather than a simple choice between recognition and compensation. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Relational Coordination Theory, the study conceptualized recognition as a socially interpreted signal embedded within organizational relationships and structural conditions. Recognition was perceived as more meaningful when it aligned with individual preferences, actual contributions, interpersonal relationships, appropriate timing, and workplace realities. Conversely, its motivational significance diminished when recognition was generic, misattributed, performative, or inconsistent with organizational conditions concerning workload fairness, compensation, autonomy, and career development. These findings suggested that organizations should adopt a context-sensitive approach to employee recognition, emphasizing alignment between recognition practices, individual needs, interpersonal relationships, and organizational conditions rather than relying on standardized recognition programs.

INTRODUCTION

Recognition is a deceptively simple concept. In everyday managerial practice, it may involve expressing gratitude, praising performance, presenting awards, providing bonuses, promoting employees, involving them in strategic discussions, granting greater autonomy, or acknowledging their contributions. These practices are often grouped together because they communicate a

common message: employees and their contributions are valued. However, treating these practices as equivalent risks overlooking differences in how employees experience and interpret recognition. Public awards and private conversations convey different social meanings; financial rewards and leadership opportunities address different employee needs; recognition from customers may carry different significance than recognition from direct supervisors; and praise delivered during a challenging project may be interpreted differently from appreciation expressed weeks after its completion. Brun and Dugas (2008) conceptualized recognition as a multidimensional phenomenon directed toward individuals, work outcomes, work practices, or investment in work. They also identified multiple sources of recognition, including supervisors, colleagues, organizations, external stakeholders, and broader social relationships.

Existing empirical research has generally emphasized the positive outcomes associated with employee recognition. Field experiments have demonstrated that recognition can improve subsequent employee performance (Bradler et al., 2016). Team-based recognition has been associated with increased engagement and effort (Presslee et al., 2023), while recognition may contribute to employee retention through job satisfaction (Ndiango et al., 2024). Recognition has also been linked to productivity in healthcare settings, particularly when leadership practices support employee engagement (Kwarteng et al., 2024). Large-sample research has further positioned recognition alongside organizational fairness, leadership, and workload as important elements of the work environment associated with employee engagement, burnout, and job satisfaction (Jo & Shin, 2025). Recognition may also extend beyond formal organizational hierarchies. Customer-generated recognition can influence subsequent recognition and service outcomes (Arthur, 2023), while recognition from family members may strengthen perceptions of meaningful work through enhanced self-esteem (Hwang et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of recognition as an organizational resource.

However, the mechanisms through which recognition acquires motivational significance remain insufficiently understood. Experimental and field research has increasingly demonstrated that the conditions under which recognition is delivered influence employee responses. Private feedback may be more effective than public recognition in certain team environments (Delavallade, 2021). Peer-to-peer recognition can encourage helping behavior, although its effectiveness depends on group affiliation (Black, 2023). Conversely, public peer-recognition systems may generate unintended consequences by encouraging social comparison and reducing employees' overall feelings of appreciation (Black et al., 2024). Similarly, a systematic review of workplace verbal rewards concluded that such rewards generally support performance, although their effectiveness depends on reward characteristics, underlying psychological mechanisms, and task complexity (Siverbo, 2026). These findings challenge the assumption that recognition operates as a uniformly positive organizational practice.

Recent qualitative research has provided further insights into the contextual nature of employee recognition. In their study of paramedics, Labbé-Roy and Viau-Quesnel (2026) found that organizational recognition disproportionately emphasized exceptional lifesaving events while overlooking routine clinical responsibilities and psychosocial contributions. Managerial silence

was also interpreted as a form of feedback, while recognition associated with traumatic incidents sometimes created additional emotional burdens. These findings demonstrated that examining recognition solely in terms of frequency or quantity may overlook important contextual dimensions, including the nature of the contribution being acknowledged, the source of recognition, the circumstances surrounding its delivery, and the employee's interpretation. Understanding these dimensions was central to the present study.

The importance of an interpretive approach is further supported by related organizational research. Feedback studies have demonstrated that employees actively seek, avoid, and interpret feedback according to their self-regulatory processes, perceptions of source credibility, and surrounding feedback environments (Anseel et al., 2015; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Organizational justice research has similarly established that employees' evaluations of workplace outcomes depend on distributive, procedural, and interpersonal fairness (Colquitt et al., 2001). Research on perceived organizational support has further emphasized that employees develop perceptions of organizational appreciation and concern for their well-being through patterns of organizational treatment rather than isolated recognition events (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Accordingly, recognition can be understood as an organizational signal whose motivational significance depends on how employees interpret it within their broader social and organizational environments.

Building on these perspectives, the present study employed an employee-centered qualitative approach to analyze 18 interview records collected across diverse occupational settings. The research explored employees' experiences of workplace appreciation and the conditions under which recognition influenced their motivation and workplace relationships. The interviews examined preferred forms of recognition, experiences of insufficient appreciation, preferences for public or private acknowledgment, responses to delayed recognition, willingness to assist coworkers, considerations involving external compensation offers, and suggestions for improving organizational recognition practices. This approach enabled an examination of how employees interpreted different recognition practices and how their evaluations varied across individual, relational, and organizational circumstances.

This study proposed the concept of contextual recognition, defined as an approach in which the motivational and relational significance of recognition depends on its alignment with employees' individual, relational, and structural circumstances. Individual factors include financial needs, career stage, personal preferences, previous experiences, and desired levels of visibility. Relational factors encompass interpersonal trust, mutual respect, source credibility, shared objectives, and communication quality. Structural factors include job design, workload, organizational fairness, autonomy, career development opportunities, compensation, and organizational support. Within this framework, recognition is expected to become more meaningful when these contextual dimensions are aligned and less effective when organizational conditions contradict the appreciation being communicated.

The proposed framework integrated three complementary theoretical perspectives. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) explains how recognition may support employees' psychological needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy, while also acknowledging that recognition may

be perceived as controlling depending on its delivery and underlying intentions (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Social Exchange Theory (SET) provides a basis for understanding recognition as a relational signal of organizational support and respect that may encourage reciprocal behaviors when perceived as credible and fair, whereas insincere or inequitable recognition may undermine interpersonal trust (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Relational Coordination (RC) offers an additional perspective on recognition in interdependent work environments, emphasizing the importance of mutual respect, shared goals, shared knowledge, and frequent, timely, accurate, problem-solving communication (Gittell, 2002, 2009). Integrating these perspectives enabled recognition to be examined as a psychological, relational, and organizational coordination process.

This study sought to make four contributions to the employee recognition literature. First, it addressed a gap in understanding the mechanisms linking recognition practices to employee outcomes by emphasizing employees' interpretations of recognition. Second, it extended the conceptualization of recognition by examining the combined roles of recognition form, source, timing, visibility, specificity, and material value rather than treating recognition as a uniform practice. Third, it integrated SDT, SET, and RC into a contextual framework for understanding the psychological, relational, and organizational dimensions of recognition. Fourth, it identified potential boundary conditions that may weaken the motivational significance of recognition, including structural inconsistencies, persistent workplace pressures, misattributed contributions, mismatches in recognition visibility, and unmet compensation or career expectations. The central proposition was that recognition becomes meaningful when employees perceive it as appropriate to their individual circumstances, actual contributions, interpersonal relationships, and organizational realities.

METHOD

Research design and epistemological position

An interpretive qualitative research design was employed to examine how employees perceived and interpreted workplace recognition. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was used to identify patterns of meaning and explain variations in employees' experiences of recognition practices (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022).

Methodological rigor was addressed through transparency in the analytical process, detailed examination of the interview data, cross-case comparisons, consideration of divergent cases, coherence between findings and supporting evidence, and documentation of coding and theme development decisions. Intercoder reliability and mechanical saturation were not used as criteria for analytical quality, consistent with the principles of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021c). Sample adequacy was considered in relation to the study objectives, participant characteristics, quality of interview data, and analytical approach, following the information power framework (Malterud et al., 2016).

Development of the study and analytic corpus

The project developed in two stages. The original academic study comprised 14 semi-structured interviews and was designed around employee experiences of appreciation, reward, motivation, helping, and retention. The original research record states that this wave was conducted from 28 April to 23 May 2025, using English, Bahasa Indonesia, and Japanese, via Zoom or in-person interviews. The project was later extended for publication-oriented analysis by adding four further interview records, bringing the analytic corpus to N = 18. The uploaded extension files are auto-caption transcripts; the exact extension interview dates are not preserved in the archive used for manuscript preparation and are therefore not invented here.

The retained archive is heterogeneous in form. Fourteen original-wave participants are represented by structured, question-by-question interview summaries containing participant profiles, response summaries, selected quotations, and key findings. Four extension participants are represented by raw auto-caption transcripts. One original-wave participant (P11) also has a raw caption transcript in the archive. For the present analysis, raw transcript wording was prioritized wherever available; structured summaries were treated as condensed interview records rather than as equivalent to full transcripts. This source hierarchy is explicitly documented in the data-management workbook and is acknowledged as a methodological limitation.

Duplicate file versions were removed at the record-management stage. The final participant count is 18, not the number of uploaded files. Personal names are retained only in the confidential participant key; the manuscript uses P01–P18. Auto-caption uncertainty affects the spelling of two extension participant names and one transcript begins after the interview had already started, so those identifying details are not reproduced or inferred.

Participants and sampling logic

Participants were included because they had sufficient workplace experience to reflect on recognition practices and could discuss concrete or hypothetical recognition situations. The archive spans public administration, banking, professional services, technology/start-ups, hospitality, retail, higher education/medical research, automotive/marketing, sales, and human resources. Experience ranges from less than one year in a current academic role to approximately 19 years of work experience. This heterogeneity is analytically useful because the study asks when recognition changes meaning across context, but it also means the sample should not be treated as representative of a single national or occupational population.

Table 1. Anonymized participant profile and salient recognition context.

ID	Age	Experience	Sector / role context	Geographic / organizational context	Salient recognition orientation
P01	26	4–5 years	Public policy / digital-economy consulting	Indonesia; public-sector and think-tank contexts	Trust through greater responsibility; public visibility; respect; public-value alignment
P02	27–28	~2 years	Technology/start-up	Laos	Autonomy, trust, direct feedback; micromanagement as anti-recognition; culture over marginal pay
P03	29	6 years	Professional services	Australia/New Zealand client work	Respect and impact feedback; private praise; transparent/peer-validated recognition
P04	26	1 year	Hospitality / food and beverage	Small café	Customer appreciation; financial reward strongly meaningful; misjudgment demotivating
P05	42	19 years	Public sector	Large ministry	Ideas implemented at scale; merit-based bonus; individual/private vs team/public distinction
P06	32	~10 years	Automotive / marketing	Japan and Australia	Responsibility, growth, 360-degree feedback; private recognition; transparent performance rewards
P07	35	11–12 years	Corporate / HR-related work	Japan / global firm	Growth, voice, strategic involvement, trust; timing depends relationship and exhaustion
P08	40	17 years	Commercial sales / management	Japan / global firm	Promotion and public recognition; delayed appreciation can work when supervisor constraints are credible
P09	31	8 months in current role	Higher education / medical research	PhD / stipend-based role	Direct affirmation and frequent feedback; financial constraint changes reward preference
P10	34	12 years	Public sector / taxation	Indonesia	Formal/public recognition, promotion, ongoing feedback; structural support and relocation fairness
P11	24	1 year	Food and beverage / customer service & logistics	Multinational firm	Constructive feedback, private recognition, promotion; regular check-ins for long projects
P12	Not retained	~5 years	Human resources	Large Indonesian company	Daily private recognition, fair appraisal; public praise can create jealousy; pay/benefits matter
P13	33	9 years	Banking	Indonesia; state-owned and international banks	Visible formal recognition; private ratings can feel hollow; large

					pay/brand differences can override culture
P14	Not retained	7 years	Legal / professional services / retail	Colombia and Australia	Career progression, visible recognition, work-life balance; quality of recognition over timing
P15	32	10–11 years	Public sector / taxation	Indonesia	Recognition as a whole process from trust to support to acknowledgment; personal recognition and respect
P16	23	1.5 years	Hospitality and retail	Nando's and TK Maxx	Private/personal appreciation, feedback, responsibility; credit attribution; career-stage sensitivity
P17	Not retained	~3 years	Public sector / customs and excise	Indonesia	Formal award and promotion; public recognition; process still matters; helping not driven by praise
P18	Not retained	Not retained	Start-up / education-animation / external-stakeholder role	Two start-up workplaces	Shared values, fair recognition, respect, autonomy/choice; large salary differences can override culture

Interview guide and data generation

The semi-structured guide contained three parts. General questions elicited participant background, what made them feel valued, when they felt unappreciated, public/private preferences, and rankings or reflections on seven recognition/reward forms: bonus, personal recognition, promotion, gifts, personal growth, learning, and respect from supervisors or employees. Situational questions then varied timing, helping, and retention conditions. Participants imagined a stressful project followed by delayed recognition; considered whether supervisor praise would alter willingness to help a coworker outside formal duties; and weighed a recognition-rich current job against an alternative offering slightly higher pay but little appreciation. The final reflection asked how recognition and reward systems could be improved.

This structure was particularly useful for the present theoretical purpose because it elicited both spontaneous accounts and comparative judgments. Participants could first define recognition in their own terms and then respond to controlled contrasts involving timing, visibility, reciprocity, and pay. The interview design therefore generated material on recognition as lived experience, preference, relational signal, and trade-off rather than only asking whether participants liked recognition.

The original research document indicates interviews of approximately 60 minutes and multiple interview languages. Because only part of the raw audio/transcript archive is available in the materials used for this manuscript, the final submitted methods section should be checked against the researchers' original scheduling/recording log before submission. We retain only facts explicitly supported by the research record and avoid manufacturing missing procedural detail.

Data management and source hierarchy

A data-management workbook was created to separate confidential identifiers from anonymized analytic material. The confidential key links names to P01–P18 and is not intended for submission. The anonymized profile contains age where retained, work experience, sector, organizational context, source type, and a short analytic note. The workbook also records the codebook, participant-by-code matrix, theme matrix, quote bank, audit trail, COREQ readiness items, reference verification, and submission blockers.

The source hierarchy was: raw transcript/caption evidence first; structured interview summary second; prior manuscript synthesis third. Where a raw caption and a structured summary were both available, the raw record was treated as the stronger evidentiary source. Direct quotations were used only when wording was preserved in an archived record. Auto-caption quotations were lightly cleaned for filler words and obvious transcription artifacts without changing substantive meaning. Because full audio is not available in the uploaded archive, quotations should be checked against original recordings where those recordings still exist and publication consent permits their use.

Reflexive thematic analysis and cross-case comparison

Analysis followed six recursive RTA phases. First, we familiarized ourselves with the 18 records and wrote participant-level notes about what counted as recognition, what weakened it, and how participants reasoned through the situational questions. Second, we coded meaning units across the corpus. The final working codebook contained 18 codes, including respect/being seen; trust/responsibility; public visibility; private sincerity; financial/material salience; promotion/career growth; feedback/process support; timing sensitivity; attribution/credit fairness; procedural fairness/transparency; relationship/source credibility; shared purpose/team obligation; workload/support congruence; personalization/preference fit; culture/work environment; pay-threshold trade-off; career-stage contingency; and customer/external recognition.

Third, related codes were clustered into candidate themes, but the team did not simply convert interview questions into themes. For example, the public/private question contributed to a broader ‘fit’ theme involving source, visibility, form, and contribution accuracy; the delayed-recognition question contributed to a process-versus-endpoint theme; and the pay scenario contributed to a broader threshold-trade-off theme. Fourth, candidate themes were reviewed against participant-level evidence and contradictory cases. Fifth, themes were rewritten as analytic claims rather than topic labels. Sixth, the themes were connected to SDT, SET, and RC to develop the Contextual Recognition Model.

Cross-case comparison was used to preserve heterogeneity. We actively examined cases that challenged an emerging pattern. For example, while many participants preferred process recognition, P13 and P14 accepted end-of-project recognition under certain conditions; while many discounted gifts, P16 described small tangible rewards as meaningful in a casual hospitality context; while appreciation often supported retention, P12 would consider a slightly better offer and P13 explicitly described a large pay threshold that could override culture. These cases were not treated as noise. They were used to refine the model and establish boundary conditions.

The analysis therefore combines patterned interpretation with case variation. Frequency was informative but not decisive: a theme could be theoretically important even if it was not the most frequently mentioned topic, provided it explained meaningful variation in how recognition was interpreted. The resulting six themes are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Final thematic structure and principal analytic mechanism.

Theme	Analytic claim	Core codes / mechanisms	Illustrative contrast
T1. Recognition is interpreted, not uniformly received	Recognition can mean respect, trust, growth, money, visibility, feedback, autonomy, customer appreciation, or correct credit.	C01–C07, C14, C18	P04 foregrounded money; P13 visibility; P01 trust/responsibility; P09 affirmation.
T2. Fit matters	Meaning depends on match among contribution, source, visibility and form.	C03, C04, C09, C10, C11, C14	P12 preferred private recognition; P13 wanted visibility; P05 differentiated individual/private from team/public.
T3. Recognition is a process	Timing effects depend on stress, project length, relationship and sincerity.	C07, C08, C11	P15/P16 wanted ongoing support; P14 cared more about quality than timing.
T4. Relational credibility matters	Recognition gains force through trust, shared purpose, communication and relationship quality.	C01, C11, C12, C15	Many would help regardless of praise; some experienced positive mood spillover after praise.
T5. Structural congruence is required	Recognition is discounted when workload, fairness, pay, autonomy or support contradict it.	C05, C10, C13, C15	Micromanagement, invisible performance, normal distribution, overload, or inadequate pay weakened recognition.
T6. Retention follows threshold trade-offs	Recognition influences staying, but large pay/career differences and career stage can override it.	C16, C17, C06, C15	P13: 20% vs 50%; P16: career-stage distinction; P07: financial responsibilities can change preference.

Reflexivity, trustworthiness, and reporting quality

The researchers entered the project with a practical interest in employee appreciation and an expectation that recognition would generally be positive. The analysis changed that assumption. Repeated comparison across cases increasingly shifted the interpretation from ‘recognition motivates’ to ‘recognition is evaluated.’ Cases emphasizing money, discomfort with public praise, delayed-recognition acceptance, and helping independent of praise were particularly important in challenging a simple positive-effects narrative. The concept of contextual recognition emerged from this shift.

Credibility was supported through a structured audit trail, source hierarchy, cross-case matrices, negative/deviant case analysis, explicit separation of verbatim wording from paraphrase, and triangulation across three theoretical lenses. Reporting was developed with COREQ and SRQR principles in mind, although items not supported by the archive such as a complete recruitment log or member-checking procedure are not claimed.

Ethics and consent

The study originated as an academic research project at the University of Melbourne and the raw extension captions document participants being informed about the research purpose and being asked for recording permission. However, the formal institutional ethics approval/exemption determination and the full scope of publication consent are not contained in the archive available for manuscript preparation. These details must be verified against institutional records before external submission. This manuscript therefore does not invent an ethics number or claim procedures that cannot be documented. Participant identities are anonymized in the analytic manuscript and the confidential key is kept separate from submission files.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The six themes form a sequence rather than six independent categories. Participants first defined what counted as recognition for them (Theme 1). They then evaluated whether a specific recognition signal fit the contribution, source, visibility and form (Theme 2), including when it occurred during the work process (Theme 3). Those evaluations were embedded in relationships and shared purpose (Theme 4) and tested against structural work realities (Theme 5). Finally, participants translated the resulting interpretation into stay/leave judgments that revealed economic and career thresholds (Theme 6). Table 3 maps the four research questions to these themes.

Table 3. Research-question to theme map

Research question	Primary themes	How the themes answer the question
RQ1. How is recognition interpreted?	T1, T2	Recognition is plural and configurational: employees interpret respect, trust, money, visibility, growth, feedback, autonomy and credit through fit.
RQ2. When is it meaningful/motivating/retention-enhancing?	T2, T3, T4, T6	When the signal fits contribution and preference, occurs at a credible time, comes from a valued relationship, and remains competitive with material/career alternatives.
RQ3. When is it symbolic/insufficient/ineffective?	T2, T3, T5	When recognition is generic, misattributed, delayed beyond usefulness, performative, unfair, or contradicted by workload/support/pay conditions.
RQ4. How do role, culture, exchange and coordination shape effects?	T3, T4, T5, T6	They form the contextual filters that determine credibility, reciprocity, cooperation, and whether recognition can influence retention.

Theme 1. Recognition is interpreted, not uniformly received

The first theme is foundational: participants did not share one definition of recognition. Instead, they interpreted recognition through what was scarce, consequential, or identity-relevant in their own work. For some, recognition meant being respected and seen; for others it meant money, promotion, strategic inclusion, customer appreciation, autonomy, or the accurate attribution of work. This variation makes a universal ‘best recognition practice’ theoretically implausible.

A first cluster interpreted recognition as interpersonal validation. P01 described feeling appreciated when a senior leader offered affirmation and entrusted her with a larger project. P09 valued direct statements such as ‘you’re doing a great job’ or ‘you’re on track’ because they provided reassurance in an uncertain academic environment. P15 described recognition as an end-

to-end experience of being considered capable, supported during the work, and acknowledged afterward. For these participants, recognition did not merely reward an outcome; it communicated that the employee was visible and trusted.

A second cluster treated responsibility and growth as stronger recognition signals than praise. P02 associated autonomy with trust and experienced micromanagement as the opposite of recognition. P06 valued responsibility and personal growth, P07 valued inclusion in strategic conversations and having opinions taken seriously, P11 ranked promotion highly because it signaled capability, and P17 saw promotion within a public-sector hierarchy as particularly valuable because it was scarce and difficult to obtain. Recognition here was developmental: employees felt valued when the organization increased their scope, voice, or future opportunity.

A third cluster foregrounded material conditions. P04 was the clearest counterexample to assumptions that non-financial recognition is inherently superior: 'Just give me the money.' Salary increases had direct quality-of-life value and could simultaneously communicate appreciation. P05 similarly ranked merit-based bonus highly. P09, despite valuing verbal affirmation, noted that a constrained stipend made financial improvement unusually salient. These cases do not invalidate intrinsic or relational accounts; they show that the valence of recognition depends partly on economic context.

Visibility constituted a fourth form of meaning. P13 valued formal and public recognition because a high performance rating that remained invisible felt incomplete. P01 also linked public recognition to portfolio and career continuity. P10 saw public recognition as reputation-building. Yet others preferred private recognition precisely because visibility carried social costs. P12 worried about jealousy; P11 found private recognition more sincere; P05 distinguished individual/private recognition from team/public recognition. Visibility was therefore not a universally positive attribute it was a context-sensitive resource.

P15: "When I feel most valued, it's like a whole process. Start from the beginning to the end. It's not just about your results."

P04: "Just give me the money."

P13: "I got the highest performance level… but no one knows. It's not published… I don't feel recognized by larger people."

Taken together, these accounts suggest that recognition is not a practice with a fixed meaning. It is an interpretation of organizational signals against the employee's current needs, aspirations, constraints, and social position. What looks like 'the same' recognition from the organization's perspective may therefore be psychologically different across recipients.

Theme 2. Fit matters: contribution, source, visibility, and form

If Theme 1 explains why recognition means different things, Theme 2 explains what makes a specific act credible. Participants repeatedly evaluated whether the recognition fit four elements: the actual contribution, the source, the preferred visibility, and the form. Misfit on any element could weaken the signal.

Contribution fit was especially important when credit could be misallocated. P16 described a strong negative reaction when a manager praised someone else for work she had completed. The problem was not a lack of praise in the abstract; it was inaccurate attribution. P13 similarly experienced an invisible high rating as insufficient because recognition did not travel to the people whose awareness mattered. P14 rejected generic thanks when they failed to acknowledge the effort involved. Recognition therefore became meaningful when it accurately named what the employee had contributed.

Source credibility also mattered. P04 valued customer smiles and compliments because hospitality made the customer an immediate evaluator of service quality, but he also wished acknowledgment could come from the senior colleague who had once misjudged him. P01 placed high value on recognition from powerful supervisors because it signaled trust and career legitimacy. P09 preferred direct feedback from supervisors or senior PhD students who could credibly assess academic progress. Source matters because the same words carry different informational and relational weight depending on who is positioned to know and value the work.

Visibility fit divided participants. P13, P01, P10, P14 and P17 valued public or at least team-visible recognition, often because visibility translated into reputation, portfolio value, or formal career recognition. By contrast, P11 and P12 preferred private acknowledgment, and P05 preferred private recognition for individual achievement but public recognition for team achievement. P18 wanted public recognition only when it was fair. The finding is not a cultural binary; the relevant question is whether visibility serves or threatens the social meaning the employee wants from recognition.

Form fit extended to tangible rewards and gifts. Gifts were commonly ranked low because they could feel generic, ceremonial, culturally inappropriate, or disconnected from effort (P01, P03, P06, P07, P10, P11, P13, P14, P18). Yet P16 described chocolates from a manager as pleasant within a casual hospitality relationship. The contradiction is theoretically useful: a gift is not intrinsically shallow. Its value depends on whether the form fits the relationship, setting, and employee expectation.

P12: "I prefer to have private recognition… public recognition… makes you feel uncomfortable… may create jealousy among us."

P13: "I'd like to have personalized recognition and rewards… everyone is different."

P18: "I want it to be fair… I want to get recognized publicly, but it should be a fair recognition."

Theme 2 therefore reframes personalization. Personalization is not simply allowing employees to choose from a reward menu; it requires matching recognition to the actual contribution, to a source with legitimate knowledge of that contribution, to an appropriate degree of visibility, and to a form that carries value in context.

Theme 3. Recognition is often a process, not only an endpoint

Timing produced one of the clearest forms of variation in the dataset. A substantial group wanted recognition during the process of difficult work because acknowledgment functioned as information, reassurance, and support. P02 argued that praise delivered only after a long period of pressure could arrive too late to prevent burnout. P09 wanted supervisors to be aware and responsive while work was unfolding. P10 preferred ongoing acknowledgment across long projects. P12 said end recognition was still positive but weaker than hearing something like 'keep going' during the process. P15 described recognition as a whole journey from trust at the beginning through support in the middle to acknowledgment at the end. P16 said end-only recognition after stress could feel more like mockery than appreciation.

However, delayed recognition was not uniformly ineffective. P03 considered recognition meaningful regardless of timing because its absence made work feel transactional. P05 believed any recognition could create a positive mood. P08 accepted delayed recognition because he understood the limits of a country manager's attention. P13 expected recognition after completion and saw end-of-project evaluation as appropriate. P14 stated explicitly that quality mattered more than timing. P11 accepted end recognition but wanted periodic check-ins for longer projects. These cases show that timing is interpreted through expectations about the task and the

recognizer.

The key mechanism appears to be managerial attentiveness. During stressful or uncertain work, process recognition communicates that someone is paying attention to the employee's effort and obstacles. When the employee already expects evaluation at the end, or understands why the manager cannot observe the process, delayed recognition can remain credible. But when silence during the process signals indifference, end praise has to overcome an accumulated deficit of support. This explains why identical timing can be experienced as reasonable by one employee and 'too late' by another.

P12: "It's nice… but it could have less impact… would be nice if during the process they say something like "keep going.""

P14: "I expect recognition at the end of the project… it's the way they recognize, not the timing."

P16: "After the whole thing is done, he appreciates me later… it's too late for me."

Theme 3 therefore extends recognition research beyond frequency. The central distinction is not simply immediate versus delayed recognition; it is whether recognition arrives at a moment when it can still perform the function the employee needs direction, reassurance, relational support, closure, or formal evaluation.

Theme 4. Relational credibility converts recognition into motivational meaning

The helping scenario was designed to test whether praise created straightforward reciprocity. The data largely rejected that simple model. Many participants said they would help or decline to help for reasons independent of praise: workload, relationship, professional duty, team responsibility, shared purpose, or task difficulty. P01 grounded helping in respect and public value; P11 said he was open to helping friends even without praise; P12 said there was 'no correlation' because helping followed teamwork; P13 framed helping as part of organizational work. P04 likewise saw unrelated helping as a job-boundary issue rather than an obligation created by appreciation.

Other participants described a softer spillover effect. P03, P08, P09, P10, P16 and P18 suggested that sincere praise could improve mood, confidence, or energy and thereby make helping more likely. P18 was especially revealing: the participant initially resisted saying praise would matter, then acknowledged that it might work subconsciously. Recognition therefore may influence prosocial behavior indirectly through affect and relationship quality rather than through a conscious exchange calculation.

These differences support a relational interpretation. Recognition is most credible when embedded in ongoing patterns of respect, communication, and shared purpose. P06 valued a 360-degree feedback environment because multiple sources could recognize contribution. P07 emphasized trust and voice. P15 valued recognition across the whole work process, not as a one-off event. In these contexts recognition reinforced an existing relational system. It did not manufacture commitment from nothing.

Relational credibility also explains why the source can repair or deepen prior experiences. P04 was hurt by a senior colleague's negative judgment and would have valued recognition from that same person because it would revise the relational meaning of the earlier criticism. P02's indirect praise being complimented to others but not directly failed to create the same sense of being seen. Recognition therefore carries relationship history with it.

P01: "If my coworkers are respectful, I will help them… we create public value by helping each other."

P11: "Even without praise, I am open to helping my friend."

Theme 4 qualifies a narrow reciprocity model. Recognition can support reciprocity, but its effects are nested within shared goals, existing relationships, and coordination norms. This is why SET and RC are complementary: SET explains perceived support and reciprocity, while RC explains why mutual respect and shared goals organize cooperation even when no immediate reward exchange is salient.

Theme 5. Structural congruence is a prerequisite

Participants repeatedly evaluated recognition against the broader employment system. Praise could feel genuine, yet still insufficient if the job contained unresolved structural problems. This theme is the strongest boundary condition in the dataset and helps distinguish substantive from symbolic recognition.

Workload and burnout were central examples. P02 described sustained pressure and insufficient real-time acknowledgment that culminated in burnout and exit; recognition after resignation was too late to retain her. P09 described administrative burdens and lack of supervisor responsiveness that interfered with core research. P10 argued that recognition during difficult projects was necessary, and that toxic or emotionally draining conditions could justify leaving even for lower pay. P14 linked poor communication, heavy workload, and lack of career progression to feeling unappreciated and emphasized that high salaries do not prevent burnout.

Fairness and performance systems formed another boundary. P12 criticized opaque performance distribution and recommended removing normal-distribution constraints that limited top ratings. P13 experienced a high rating as hollow when it was invisible. P18 insisted that public recognition should be fair. P03 rejected subjective merit-pay systems and forced recognition platforms. Recognition could not credibly signal value if the surrounding evaluation process felt arbitrary or opaque.

Autonomy and managerial style also mattered. P02's strongest anti-recognition experience was micromanagement: frequent monitoring communicated distrust even when the organization might formally reward performance. P18 emphasized freedom of choice in non-work activities and disliked recognition-linked expectations of participation. These cases illustrate structural contradiction: the organization can say 'we value you' while its management system communicates 'we do not trust your judgment.'

Material adequacy complicated the picture. P04 valued money because it materially improved life. P09's stipend context made financial rewards unusually important. P05 emphasized merit-based bonus, while P18 criticized salary increases that were frequent but too small to feel meaningful. Recognition is thus more likely to be experienced as substantive when it is consistent with economic and career realities rather than presented as a low-cost substitute for them.

P10: "Mental health isn't worth trading for salary."

P12: "If I deliver all my ideas and then no one responded at all… I will feel undervalued."

Theme 5 therefore introduces structural congruence into the Contextual Recognition Model. Recognition is credible when the surrounding work system does not contradict it. Under structural incongruence, recognition can still produce a pleasant moment, but its capacity to sustain motivation, trust, or retention is sharply reduced.

Theme 6. Retention follows threshold trade-offs, not a simple recognition-versus-pay choice

The retention scenario initially appeared to ask a binary question: appreciation or salary? Participants' answers showed that the real decision is nonlinear. Many would reject a slightly higher salary if it meant moving into a less appreciative environment. P01 preferred staying in a supportive setting; P03 saw lack of appreciation as a warning about management quality; P08

would stay with an appreciative company; P09 would stay unless the pay difference became extreme; P10 preferred support over marginal pay; P11 would stay for a slight increase but reconsider around a much larger increase; P14 preferred healthy culture and work-life balance; and P16 stayed in a job partly because she was treated well by the people around her.

But appreciation had limits. P13 provided the clearest threshold language: a 20% increase would not necessarily induce movement, but a 50% increase might. P04 might move for a 50% increase or double pay if the work still fit his skills. P11 similarly described a significant pay increase as a potential reason to leave. P17's transcript distinguished a small increase from a roughly 50% increase. P18 said a much higher or doubled salary could override the positive environment, whereas a modest increase would not. These cases show that recognition supports retention within an economic range; beyond a personally meaningful threshold, other resources dominate.

Career stage and life circumstances changed the threshold. P07 said salary was not currently the primary motivator but acknowledged that financial responsibilities could alter the answer. P09's limited stipend increased the salience of money. P16 explicitly distinguished how a career starter might behave from how a middle-aged worker with stronger relational embeddedness might decide. P14 linked salary to career progression rather than treating pay as a standalone incentive. The recognition–retention relationship is therefore contingent on what employees need at a particular life and career stage.

Job embeddedness provides a useful interpretive bridge. Employees weigh links to colleagues, fit with the work environment, and the sacrifice involved in leaving. Recognition can strengthen those links and fit, but it competes with career opportunity, economic security, and well-being. The threshold theme therefore prevents the Contextual Recognition Model from becoming a romantic claim that culture always beats money.

P13: "If the salary increase is only slight say 20% I would not go. But if it's 50%, I might move."

P16: "It was more about the people and the fact that I was very well treated here."

Theme 6 is the principal new boundary contribution emerging from the enlarged N = 18 corpus. Recognition can raise the value of staying, but it does not eliminate labor-market trade-offs. Its retention effect is conditional and may be nonlinear.

RQ1: recognition is an interpretive social signal

RQ1 asked how employees interpret recognition practices. The answer is that recognition is neither a single object nor a fixed positive stimulus. Participants interpreted being valued through respect, trust, visibility, money, promotion, growth, feedback, autonomy, customer appreciation, and correct credit attribution. This finding extends Brun and Dugas's (2008) multidimensional account by showing how employees combine object, source, form, and personal context into a judgment of meaning.

The interpretive emphasis also connects recognition to feedback theory. Kluger and DeNisi (1996) showed long ago that feedback interventions can have variable and even negative effects, while feedback-environment research emphasizes credibility, quality, and source availability. Our findings suggest recognition behaves similarly. Employees are not passive recipients of positive messages. They assess what the message implies about competence, relationship quality, status, fairness, and future opportunity.

The 2026 evidence further supports this direction. Siverbo (2026) concludes that verbal reward attributes and work complexity condition their effects; Labbé-Roy and Viau-Quesnel (2026) show qualitatively that everyday work can remain invisible even when organizations

celebrate exceptional outcomes. The present study broadens that logic across sectors and forms of recognition.

RQ2: meaningful recognition requires fit, useful timing, and relational credibility

RQ2 asked when recognition is meaningful, motivating, and retention-enhancing. Three conditions recur. First, the signal must fit the contribution and employee preference. This explains why public recognition can strengthen reputation for one employee and create discomfort for another, why promotion can be a powerful recognition signal in structured careers but relatively weak in a flat start-up, and why small gifts can be superficial in one context yet relationally warm in another.

Second, recognition must arrive at a functionally useful time. Process recognition becomes especially valuable when the employee needs guidance, reassurance, or evidence that a manager is paying attention. Delayed recognition remains meaningful when employees expect outcome evaluation, when the recognition is specific and substantive, or when constraints on the recognizer are understood. Timing therefore interacts with task duration, stress, relationship history, and the function recognition is expected to perform.

Third, recognition must be relationally credible. SET helps explain why credible recognition signals support and invites reciprocal commitment, while RC clarifies why recognition is especially consequential when it reinforces mutual respect and makes interdependent contributions visible. The helping scenario demonstrates that praise is not a simple trigger of prosocial behavior. Recognition often reinforces an existing relational architecture rather than creating one.

RQ3: recognition becomes symbolic when organizational reality contradicts the message

RQ3 asked when recognition becomes symbolic, insufficient, or ineffective. The answer is strongest in Theme 5: recognition loses force under structural incongruence. Praise cannot reliably compensate for chronic overload, opaque appraisal, micromanagement, weak communication, inadequate pay, or blocked growth. This is consistent with JD–R theory, which predicts that resources matter in relation to demands, and with justice research, which shows that employees evaluate organizational actions through fairness (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Colquitt et al., 2001).

This finding also clarifies the difference between recognition and organizational support. Recognition can be one cue of support, but employees infer support from patterns of treatment (Eisenberger et al., 1986). When other cues contradict recognition, the appreciative act may be discounted. Symbolic recognition is therefore not simply ‘bad praise’; it is a credibility failure created by inconsistency between words, systems, and lived work conditions.

The result has practical and theoretical importance because recognition programs are attractive precisely because they can be inexpensive. But low-cost recognition can become counterproductive when organizations use it as a substitute for costly structural improvements. The model therefore treats fairness, workload realism, support, and economic adequacy as boundary conditions rather than optional background variables.

RQ4: integrating SDT, SET, and Relational Coordination

RQ4 asked how role expectations, culture, social exchange, and relational coordination shape recognition effectiveness. The integrated model shows that the three theoretical lenses operate at different but connected levels. SDT explains the psychological content of recognition: competence when work is accurately acknowledged, relatedness when appreciation communicates connection, and autonomy when recognition takes the form of trust or choice. SET explains the relational credibility of the signal: recognition can communicate organizational

support and invite reciprocity, but only when it is fair and consistent with everyday treatment. RC explains the team process: recognition can make roles and contributions visible, reinforce mutual respect, and support coordination around shared goals.

The value of integration is visible in cases that no single theory fully explains. P01's larger-project responsibility simultaneously affirmed competence, signaled trusted exchange, and increased her role visibility. P15's 'whole process' account combined informational support, relationship quality, and coordination. P12's discomfort with public recognition involved relational and fairness concerns beyond basic psychological need satisfaction. P13's invisible high rating was positive performance information but weak social status recognition. These examples justify a model in which interpretation occurs before the three pathways rather than assuming one universal mechanism.

The model also includes negative and threshold pathways absent from many positive-effects frameworks. Structural incongruence can block all three mechanisms, while economic and career thresholds can dominate retention decisions even when recognition is credible. This produces a more realistic account of recognition in contemporary employment relationships.

Comparison with prior recognition research

Our results are consistent with experimental work showing that recognition often improves performance or engagement, but they explain why average positive effects coexist with exceptions. Bradler et al. (2016) and Presslee et al. (2023) demonstrate that recognition can change performance and effort; our data identify the interpretive conditions under which employees are likely to treat such recognition as valuable. Delavallade (2021) and Black et al. (2024) show that public/private configuration and social comparison matter; our findings extend this by showing that visibility preferences are tied to role, career benefit, team harmony, and perceived fairness.

The findings also align closely with Siverbo's (2026) conclusion that reward attributes and work complexity matter, but extend the analysis beyond verbal rewards to promotion, autonomy, money, growth, gifts, and visibility. The paramedic study by Labbé-Roy and Viau-Quesnel (2026) is especially complementary: their focus on recognition of exceptional outcomes versus everyday work parallels our contribution-fit theme and supports the idea that organizations can recognize the wrong representation of work.

Finally, our retention threshold finding extends recognition–retention research. Ndiango et al. (2024) show a positive pathway through job satisfaction, while job-embeddedness research emphasizes links, fit, and sacrifice. Our qualitative evidence suggests that recognition contributes to fit and relational links but operates within a nonlinear trade-off structure. Future quantitative work should therefore test not only linear main effects but interactions and threshold effects involving pay differences, career opportunity, financial strain, and career stage.

CONCLUSION

Employee recognition is important not merely because employees seek praise, but because it shapes how they interpret the acknowledgment of their contributions, the credibility of workplace relationships, organizational fairness, and the consistency between expressed appreciation and organizational practices. Analysis of 18 interview records revealed that similar recognition practices were interpreted differently depending on employees' individual needs, job responsibilities, recognition sources, preferences for public or private acknowledgment, timing, interpersonal relationships, and working conditions.

The resulting Contextual Recognition Model conceptualized recognition as a socially interpreted signal embedded within organizational relationships and structural conditions. Recognition was perceived as more meaningful when it appropriately reflected employees' contributions, was delivered at a relevant time by credible sources, supported basic psychological needs, reinforced social exchange relationships and relational coordination, and aligned with fair organizational practices. Conversely, its motivational significance diminished when recognition was generic, misattributed, performative, excessively delayed, or perceived as a symbolic substitute for adequate organizational support, fair compensation, autonomy, and career development opportunities.

The study contributed to employee recognition research by emphasizing the contextual conditions under which recognition acquired motivational significance rather than assuming its universal effectiveness. The findings highlighted the importance of examining how, why, and under what circumstances employees interpreted recognition as meaningful. From a managerial perspective, organizations should adopt a context-sensitive approach that aligns recognition practices with employees' contributions, individual preferences, interpersonal relationships, and organizational conditions rather than relying exclusively on standardized recognition programs. (Hossain et al., 2024; Khanijau et al., 2026)

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