



Briefing 17/55 December 2017

## Staff award and recognition schemes

### Key Points

- Staff award and recognition schemes are an opportunity to enhance employee engagement, motivate high performance and communicate corporate ethos and objectives
- This briefing analyses the outcome of an APSE Network Query, compiling 27 examples of staff award and recognition practises in local authorities and public sector organisations.
- Further, it outlines a series of questions to ask to help ensure Staff Award schemes are well-formed and effective.

### Why is employee recognition important?

Staff award and recognition schemes have the potential to increase employee engagement, motivate higher performance and build employer/employee relationships. A well-formed approach can better enable an organisation to achieve its organisational goals and help improve staff retention as well as enhance the workplace culture such that staff are happier and healthier, which in turn contributes again to organisational performance in a virtuous loop towards ongoing organisational success.

### What staff award and recognition schemes are in place, within Local Government?

A recent APSE Network Query invited APSE member organisations to share examples of Staff Awards and Recognition schemes, with a particular emphasis on staff award schemes to which 26 local authorities, 1 wholly owned local authority trading company and 1 Housing ALMO responded.

Among those who responded, 20 indicated they have a Staff Awards scheme, of which 14 celebrated the winners' success at an Award ceremony, whilst others present the winners with their accolades at alternative opportunities such as Team Meetings and Full Council Meetings.

Of those who hold an Award Ceremony, most indicated they hold an evening event but two, an Afternoon Tea to present the awards, while another a 'Recognition Lunch'. Evening events carry a greater sense of occasion, being held outside of the working day and allow celebrations and festivities to continue for longer and in turn may contribute to a greater sense of significance of the winner's achievements and sense of appreciation for employee contributions but an afternoon event may be more inclusive for those who are unable to attend evening events.

The award categories were many varied and Figure 1 shows all those that were submitted in response to this Network Query. Several authorities reported that the award categories vary from year to year to reflect organisational priorities, another initiated a monthly award scheme, 'Team New Council', with a new theme each month to help introduce and illustrate particular behaviours, valued for the organisation's development as the new vision for the authority was launched.

Most award schemes included in the query had both individual and team awards, possibly reflective of the value of team work as a skill and practice within these organisations. The prizes for individual and team categories varied accordingly and included certificates, trophies, gifts, annual leave entitlement, learning and development activities, charity donations and financial rewards for individuals or shared between teams and additionally, team meals and away days for teams.

*'Our award scheme categories and theme changes on a yearly basis and we amend the award categories to fit in with current thinking, policy and priorities of the Council. We have found this gets staff thinking about how their role fits in and what more they can do'*

To build an award scheme as a system responsive to organisational values enables the award scheme to be an educational tool for staff, to broaden organisational understanding of those values which the organisation holds most dear and to exemplify and engender the behaviours that will help meet the strategic priorities of the future. Rewards may additionally reflect the culture and ethos the organisation is seeking to promote and the success celebrated, by for example, matching something of the attitude and qualities demonstrated by the winning individual or team through a donation to a specific cause or by involving the winners in activities that will further develop their talents and abilities.

A number of authorities reported a cumulative award process, whereby celebrations of employee achievements are punctuated throughout the year and success in these earlier stages passports the winners through to a further round of staff awards. In three cases, this was for an 'Employee of the Year' award; Staff who had successfully achieved 'Employee of the Quarter' in one authority and 'Employee of

the month' in another were automatically put through to 'Employee of the Year'. In another Council, within a Facilities Management team, managers can nominate individuals for a certificate under a scheme called 'Made a Difference' for work above and beyond the individual's job description. Examples of such include; a staff member learning to sign to allow them to converse with deaf/hard of hearing pupils, a staff member who entered a national competition for 'School Cook of the Year' and cleaners who were recognised by a customer for making a difference to communal areas in student accommodation. 'Gold awards' are then awarded at the annual staff training day to those who have achieved more than one certificate over the course of the year.

A number of authorities reported more frequently administered approaches to staff reward and recognition, alongside Annual Award schemes, to quickly provide feedback to employees that their work is appreciated and to recognise smaller, day to day workplace activities, which also reflect those behaviours which

*'We have had 'Chocolate Thank You Fridays'....anyone can nominate anyone else to receive a personal letter of thanks, detailing what was worthy of a thank you- plus a bar of chocolate. This system of fun recognition was well received by many as it was delivered quickly and was proportionate. We also found that staff members normally shared their chocolate with their team mates'*

the organisation would want to reward and celebrate. One authority holds, 'Stars monthly' where staff can nominate colleagues for a monthly award and winners receive a voucher, balloon and a thank you card from a senior leader. Another reported a scheme where managers can report 'good news stories' to Directors who will then send a thank you letter to the employee's home address and a further described a scheme called, 'Chocolate Thank you Fridays' where any member of staff can

nominate a staff member to receive a Thank you card and a bar of chocolate in recognition of their contribution and success in the workplace.

In most cases, nominations for awards, across the examples of award schemes collated could be made by any member of staff or elected member and in some cases, by customers, council partners or any member of the public. One authority varies the scope of those who can nominate according to award category, by for example, allowing external nominations for a category such as 'Customer Service Excellence' but not for other categories. Nominations themselves may extend beyond the staff body, with one Council nominating, 'Council Volunteer of the Year', to recognise the contributions of external partners and another including any individual involved in delivering Council services, whether an agency worker or staff and whether working for a Council provider or for the Council directly, to help ensure the scheme is inclusive and fair.



description will be included, a specific question requesting this information is more likely to generate this information than a general invitation to describe the individual's qualification for the award. It may be suitable to have an opportunity to upload a document already produced, a presentation or report that describes the successful project to avoid the need to spend time presenting this information in a way, particular to the award process. In this way, the process enables a focus on the opportunity to recognise a member of staff and doesn't inadvertently demand excessive time or effort on the part of the individual completing the nomination, which could otherwise be spent addressing other needs of the organisation. Where significant time is invested, this could meet the learning and development needs of staff in some way, for example a simple nomination form, followed by a round of interviews involving the nominated individual or team in interview practise and/or an opportunity to develop presentation skills may be an approach that maximises learning and development opportunities for staff. Overall, the process should be simple and sufficient and accessible to as many staff members as possible to maximise the number of nominations. Equally, it needs to be well promoted with staff at all levels promoting the opportunity to submit a nomination to help ensure that those deserving of recognition, find their names within the shortlist of finalists.

### **How can we ensure the process is inclusive and resilient to accusations of unfairness?**

It is possible to disproportionately affect the opportunity for certain individuals and teams to qualify for an award by, for example, installing a suite of awards categories, for which the success criteria lend themselves to large-scale projects only of a kind some staff members may never be involved with, or by having the period for nominations over a time which is particularly busy for a certain team, such as the close of the financial year for the finance team or the summer period for parks and events teams. Consideration should be given to the perspective of each staff team as they consider their options for making nominations and whether any aspect of the scheme design may make them less likely than their fellow employees to feel able or willing to participate. Perceived unfairness can quickly diminish employee motivation for engaging in a staff reward and recognition process and so it is important to build transparency in to the approach and to carefully guard the integrity of the scheme.

### **What rewards/prizes will be most effective for our purposes?**

In a recent short article, 'Employee recognition awards & ideas for the 21st century', Investors in People recommend individualising prizes for recognition. Notwithstanding the importance of treating winners fairly, it may be possible to individualise the prizes to further enhance the effectiveness of the scheme. In much the same way that colleagues delight in choosing individual leaving gifts for colleagues and friends, staff awards are an opportunity for managers and colleagues to demonstrate that they know their colleagues and to give them something they will truly value. It may be that a prize value will be established and colleagues will indicate for each winner, what may be most prized by the winning individual or team. Or, it may be that the prizes will be chosen to further communicate organisational values and desired behaviours by for example donations to particular causes,

learning and development opportunities to help meet future goals and opportunities to represent the organisation in that field externally.

### **APSE Comment**

The questions outlined above are not intended to be exhaustive but it is hoped that in considering the above and in the overview of other local authority award schemes, food for thought is provided for what may entail an effective staff award scheme, well formed for its purposes, inclusive and valued by staff and flexible to celebrate what is most important in an organisation's development.

A survey which asked 980 employees, "What is the most important thing that your manager or company currently does that would cause you to produce great work?", free hand responses were categorised in to nine categories, of which 'Recognition' was the modal category; Respondents identified recognition as something that would make them produce great work, over and above Inspiring Leadership or Increased Pay. (Kaufman, Christensen, Newton, 2015)

In a time of reducing budgets and squeezed resources, staff reward and recognition activities may appear low priority but evidence that employee recognition drives and motivates great work is strong and sufficiently convincing to merit investment in Staff Award and Recognition schemes and to engage us in thinking through where corporate policy and strategy may be developed to further inspire and embed the practise of employee recognition.

### **References:**

APSE, 2016 'G0307 – Examples of Staff Awards/Recognition scheme – 231216', APSE, Manchester

Investors in People, 2017. *Employee recognition awards & ideas for the 21st century* [online] (22/02/2017) Available at <https://www.investorsinpeople.com/resources/ideas-and-inspiration/employee-recognition-awards-ideas-21st-century> [Accessed 4/09/17]

Kaufman, T., Christensen, J., Newton, A., 2015 *Employee Performance: What Causes Great Work?* [online] Cicero Group. Available at: < [http://appreciate.octanner.com/2015\\_02\\_WP\\_DriversofGreatWork](http://appreciate.octanner.com/2015_02_WP_DriversofGreatWork)> [Accessed 4/09/17]

Webb, C., 2016, *How to have a Good Day*, Macmillan, London