

# How a global aviation tech company fixed its **performance-only recognition**

Recognition was slow and fragmented. Here's how they rebuilt it into a habit that drove a 7x increase in active employee presence.

## **INDUSTRY** Aviation & Travel Technology

A leading global aviation and travel technology company, home to over 7,000 professionals across 20+ countries, set out to keep an increasingly distributed workforce connected, valued, and motivated. When work went remote, that meant pulling apart a performance-first recognition model and rebuilding it around people, a transformation later recognized in the Brandon Hall Group Excellence Awards for Best Employee Recognition Program.

**7x**

growth in active platform presence in two years

**198%**

increase in peer-to-peer recognition

**77%**

rise in overall monetary recognition

**15K+**

recognition moments recorded



# The Challenge

Running recognition consistently across thousands of employees in a globally distributed aviation technology business, spread over 20+ countries from the US and Canada to the UAE and India, is hard, both strategically and operationally. The company had been leaning on a purely performance-focused approach, and it was starting to show its limits, so it shifted its R&R program toward something more holistic and employee-centric.

## The Initial Challenge

Before the transformation, recognition practices had drifted out of step with the workforce. Informal, manager-led recognition existed, but it was inconsistent and unstructured, and an employee satisfaction survey confirmed the need for a more organized, systematic approach.

Early attempts to formalize R&R, such as spot awards, performance awards at the business-unit level, and service anniversary recognition, added some structure but didn't touch the deeper issues. **One stubborn problem: the approval process for even a simple spot award could take days, which gutted the impact of timely recognition.** That delay opened a gap between the action and the acknowledgment, and it made recognition feel like an administrative task rather than genuine appreciation.

## Root Cause & Catalyst

These early problems pointed to something more fundamental: a performance-centric, top-down model. It showed up in a few ways:

- **Siloed recognition:** R&R stayed mostly inside individual teams, with little focus on cross-functional collaboration or contributions outside someone's direct reporting line. That reinforced silos and limited any sense of one organization.
- **Delayed recognition based on impact:** Managers tended to wait for visible results before recognizing anyone, overlooking the steady effort that made those results possible. The delay blunted the impact and discouraged consistent high performance.
- **Over-emphasis on top performers:** Recognition clustered around a small group of headline performers, while consistent, reliable contributors got overlooked. That bred a sense of inequity.
- **Sporadic recognition:** Without a consistent, organization-wide approach, recognition felt occasional and disconnected from daily work. It read as an event, not part of the culture.

## The Catalyst for Change (2020 and Beyond)

The shift to remote work in 2020 raised the stakes. Connection and engagement suddenly mattered more, and so did recognition. The company faced a specific set of pressures:

- **Need for value alignment:** Getting employees to live the company's core values was harder with fewer in-person interactions.
- **Remote work disconnect:** Keeping teams cohesive and recognition meaningful in a virtual setting became a real concern.
- **Evolving demographics:** A growing millennial and Gen Z workforce expected frequent feedback and faster acknowledgment.
- **Holistic well-being:** Performance recognition alone ignored employee well-being.

Together, these made the case plain: the R&R program needed a real transformation, a shift from performance-centric, top-down, and sporadic to employee-centric, holistic, and consistent.

# The Transformation

The company addressed these challenges with a full rebuild of its R&R strategy, across several moves.

## 1. Digital transformation for instant, accessible recognition

To fix delayed and inconsistent recognition, especially for remote teams, the company rolled out a digital platform that streamlined the entire R&R process. It introduced a point-based system that simplified administration and reduced tax overhead for the organization. Managers add points directly to employee wallets, and those points are redeemable across a wide range of rewards: gift cards, merchandise, experiences, travel (flights and hotels), and mobile recharges.

- **Automated workflows:** Automated approvals removed delays, so recognition could happen instantly regardless of location. Managers and peers nominate and recognize colleagues in a few clicks.
- **Mobile accessibility:** Mobile access made on-the-go recognition possible, supporting participation across every work setup.
- **Customizable templates:** Templates for different recognition types, from a quick thank-you to a formal nomination, allowed for personalization.
- **Social recognition feed:** A social feed surfaced all recognition activity, letting remote and in-office employees celebrate each other's wins.

## 2. Strategic differentiation and focus on behaviors

To move past a purely performance-centric model, the company repositioned R&R as a tool for behavioral reinforcement. Recognizing that consistent, values-aligned behaviors drive long-term success, it built a tiered system that rewarded both results and the behaviors behind them.

**A notable structural choice: the company placed R&R program ownership inside the Learning & Development (L&D) function.** Most organizations run R&R out of C&B / Total Rewards. Housing it in L&D signaled a clear view: recognition is a motivator for productive behavior, culture, and employee experience, not just a compensation lever. By treating R&R as part of Organizational Development and separating it from compensation and incentives, the company kept recognition distinct and genuinely valued.

- **Special status and recognition:** Employees who consistently demonstrated desired behaviors earned special statuses, badges, and titles on the platform. That gave public acknowledgment of sustained contribution, not just one-off wins.
- **Higher-value awards:** Sustained high performers became eligible for higher-value awards that reflected their impact.
- **Tiered monetary values and creative award names:** Increasing award values paired with creative names signaled the level of contribution (for example, a "Spark Award" for a quick idea, an "Innovation Catalyst" for a major project contribution).
- **Team awards with flexible allocation:** To handle over- and under-recognition within teams, managers could adjust award values based on each person's contribution to the team effort.

# The Transformation

## 3. Building engagement and excitement through multiple channels

- **Employee nominations and gamification:** Peer-to-peer nominations increased involvement and a sense of ownership, with gamification adding healthy competition.
- **Consistent, engaging communication:** Leadership and HR communicated regularly about the program so employees understood the criteria, process, and value of recognition. Onboarding covered the program too, so new hires knew about it from day one.

## 4. Leveraging social and emotional value through personalized experiences

- **Financial and experiential awards:** Alongside financial incentives, the company built in experiential awards such as vacation packages and family dinners at notable venues, which brought family members into the celebration.
- **Award events:** Even with a strong online platform, the company kept physical award events for a more personal, celebratory experience.
- **Family involvement in milestone celebrations:** For major milestones, senior leaders personally celebrated with employees and their families, creating lasting memories. Some moments were captured on video and shared internally to amplify the recognition.
- **Personalized milestone recognition:** The company evolved its milestone “gratitude” award by gathering input from peers and colleagues of long-serving employees, then curating award catalogs with personalized gifts and experiences.

## 5. Integrating holistic well-being

To address the growing importance of well-being, the company folded wellness into its R&R program. Knowing that employee health affects productivity, engagement, and job satisfaction, it used the Vantage Circle platform to create a “Wellness Wallet.”

The platform includes a wellness module, Vantage Fit, which lets employers run engaging wellness challenges across areas like physical activity (step-count goals, workout routines, virtual fitness classes), mindfulness and mental well-being (meditation, stress management), nutrition and hydration, and sleep hygiene. Employees earn points by completing wellness challenges, then redeem them for rewards: gift cards, merchandise, experiences, and donations.

## 6. Employee-centric, data-driven approach

The program moved from a performance-centric, business-unit-led model to a holistic, HR-led strategy, while still letting business units and regions adapt specific elements with their HRBPs. That brought more consistency and tighter alignment with company values. The company tracked key metrics such as recognition frequency, participation rates, and employee feedback, and used the data to keep improving. Strong scores on the AIR<sup>e</sup> assessment reflected the program's design maturity and its data-driven approach.

# Results & Impact

The transformation produced impressive, quantifiable results. By prioritizing timely, personalized, value-driven recognition, the company saw real gains in engagement, participation, and employees' sense of being valued.

A themed Friendship Day campaign drove **six times more rewards and recognitions** than the usual average, clear evidence of how well targeted, themed campaigns work. Active users rose by nearly three-quarters (73%) in two years, supported by a 41.6% increase in employee-driven monetary recognitions (nominations), and the "Wellness Wallet" pushed average participation in fitness challenges to 85% in the first six months of 2024.

Employee presence on the recognition platform surged **sevenfold (7x)** in just two years, with over **15,000 recognition moments** recorded in that time.

The clearest proof of culture change: a **198% increase in overall peer-to-peer recognition** across the organization in two years, alongside a **77% rise in overall monetary recognition**. Recognition stopped being an occasional event and became part of how the company works, a shift recognized in the Brandon Hall Group Excellence Awards for Best Employee Recognition Program.

## Success Highlights

- **Unprecedented growth in employee engagement:** A 7x increase in active employee presence on the recognition platform within two years, a sign of exceptional adoption and meaningful engagement across the workforce.
- **Expanding platform utilization:** 73% growth in active platform users over two years, showing the program's accessibility and relevance across regions and roles.
- **Boosting monetary recognition:** A 77% rise in overall monetary recognition over two years, reflecting how well the program tied rewards to performance.



## The platform behind results like these.

Vantage Circle is a global employee recognition and rewards platform, grounded in behavioral science, backed by a dedicated program advisory team, and connected to a rewards catalog spanning 70+ countries. Recognition happens in the flow of work, right inside Microsoft Teams and Slack. More than 700 companies and 3.2 million employees use it to make recognition consistent, meaningful, and measurable. Pair it with Vantage Pulse, Vantage Fit, and Vantage Perks when you're ready to extend into listening, well-being, and benefits.

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