

Understanding the tangible gifts language of appreciation

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Abstract

Purpose – Businesses are spending billions of dollars on recognition rewards with the intent of boosting employee engagement, job satisfaction, and ultimately, their bottom line. However, employee engagement is at an all-time low. The purpose of this study was designed to take a step back to understand if there are demographic differences that influence personal preferences for tangible gifts as their preferred language of appreciation and of those who prefer to receive gifts, what types of gifts are most valued.

Design/methodology/approach – This study compared the demographics of those who selected tangible gifts as their primary ($N = 8,811$), secondary ($N = 14,827$) or least valued ($N = 108,586$) language of appreciation (motivating by appreciation inventory, White, 2011). From those with tangible gifts as their primary language of appreciation, 500 were randomly selected to code their open-ended suggestions for a preferred gift.

Findings – There are no important factors across the demographics of gender, age or work setting that influence whether individuals are more or less likely to choose tangible gifts as their primary, secondary or least valued language of appreciation. Respondents identified gift cards, additional paid time off and gifts related to desired personal experiences as their top gift choices.

Originality/value – When giving gifts to colleagues, discovering individuals' personal preferences (favorite store, restaurant, ticketed event, food, drink and lunch option) is more likely to result in a gift that "hits the mark" in showing appreciation to the recipient.

Keywords Gifts, Appreciation, Rewards, Recognition, Employee engagement

Paper type Research paper

Employee recognition and communicating appreciation to team members have been shown as important factors relevant to employee engagement and job satisfaction (Chapman and White, 2019). Estimations have been made that over \$90bn are spent annually on employee recognition rewards in the USA (Intellective Group, 2016). Recognition programs have proliferated in the past several years, to the level that it is estimated that 85-90 per cent of all organizations have some form of employee recognition process. However, at the same time, employee engagement has sunken to its lowest level in decades – 87 per cent of employees have been found to be either marginally engaged or totally disengaged (Harter, 2018).

Historically, tangible rewards have been one of the primary ways employers recognize high performing employees. These tangible rewards may include cash gifts, gift cards or expensive vacations, but they often may be as simple as a plaque or a crystalline award (Stewart, 2017).

Not everyone likes to be shown appreciation in the same way (Chapman and White, 2019). When appreciation is not communicated in the ways that are meaningful to the recipient not only are time and effort wasted but also the goal of encouraging one's colleague is not attained and (by both parties) can result in frustration as well. Our research with over

175,000 employees has found that tangible gifts is only rarely an individual's preferred way of being shown appreciation. Over the past several years ([White, 2017, 2019](#)), only 6-7 per cent of employees have chosen tangible gifts as their primary language of appreciation.

The current study was aimed to discover:

- Are there any differences in demographic (gender, age or work setting) characteristics between those individuals who choose tangible gifts as their primary, secondary or least valued language of appreciation?
- Of those who select tangible gifts as their primary language of appreciation, what types of gifts are most valued?

Methods

The motivating by appreciation inventory ([White, 2016](#))

- is an online assessment that identifies the ways that individuals prefer to be shown appreciation in the workplace;
- consists of 30 paired statements from which respondents choose, and their primary, secondary, and least valued languages of appreciation are identified;
- although other languages of appreciation are assessed, for the purposes of the current project, only tangible gifts is discussed: giving colleagues a thoughtful gift reflecting their hobbies, interests and food preferences;
- additionally, the specific actions preferred within the respondents' primary language are also obtained both from listed items and via open-ended response. For 500 randomly selected people, responses to their open-ended preferred action items were coded into categories; and
- when individuals complete the motivating by appreciation inventory, some demographic information is also obtained, including gender, age range and type of work setting.

From the over 175,000 people who have completed the motivating by appreciation inventory, tangible gifts was selected by 8,811 as their primary language of appreciation, 14,827 as their secondary language of appreciation, and 108,586 as their least valued language of appreciation. Variability in these sample sizes exists because of missing demographic data.

Results

Demographic comparison

As the tables below summarize, the results demonstrate that there are no important factors across the demographics of gender, age or work setting that influence whether individuals are more or less likely to choose tangible gifts as their primary, secondary or least valued language of appreciation.

Slight statistical differences were found with respect to both age and work setting:

- older employees (50+ years old) choose tangible gifts less frequently than younger groups of employees. Similarly, the older employee group has a higher rate of tangible gifts being their least valued language than groups of younger employees; and
- those who work in long distance work relationships were slightly higher in their desire for gifts, and government employees were slightly lower than the other work settings. Then, these patterns were reflected in the least valued language frequencies, as well.

Table I Distribution of tangible gift language preferences by gender (N = 132,224)

Gender	Gifts primary (N = 8,811) (%)	Gifts secondary (N = 14,827) (%)	Gifts least (N = 108,586) (%)
Men	7	10	84
Women	7	12	81

Table II Distribution of tangible gift language preferences by age range (N = 71,718)

Age range	Gifts primary (N = 4,936) (%)	Gifts secondary (N = 6,821) (%)	Gifts least (N = 59,861) (%)
< 20-29	8	11	81
30-39	8	11	81
40-49	7	9	84
50+	4*	7	89*

Note: *Significantly different at $p < 0.00$

Table III Distribution of tangible gift language preferences by work setting (N = 113,426)

Work setting	Gifts primary (N = 7,596) (%)	Gifts secondary (N = 12,142) (%)	Gifts least (N = 93,688) (%)
General work setting	7	11	83
Government	5*	9	87*
Long distance	9*	12	79*
Medical	7	10	83
Military	6	13	81
Ministries/nonprofit	7	12	81
School	6	11	82

Note: *Significantly different at $p < 0.00$

While statistically significant (primarily because of the large number of respondents), the differences between the groups have little practical meaning.

Specific tangible gifts desired

When tabulating how often each action item was chosen by the 500 respondents, the list of actions fell into four clusters of frequency chosen (numbers in parentheses are the frequencies):

1. Top tier items:

- gift card (Amazon, preferred location) (89);
- additional paid time off (75); and
- experiences/tickets (69).

2. Second tier items:

- bonus/cash (51);
- written note of appreciation/honor (47);
- favorite food or drink (45); and
- personal gift, reflects hobbies, etc (38).

3. Third tier items:

- practical assistance with job or life (28);
- treat me better (more decisional latitude, respect, recognized for contributions and listen to me) (28);
- staff casual get together/party/retreat (25);
- free lunch (23); and
- flexible hours/schedule/work remotely (21).

4. Lower tier items:

- flowers/gift basket/balloons (12);
- something practical for desk/work (8);
- company logo items (6a);
- celebrate my birthday in a special way (6); and
- donation to my favorite cause (5).

Firstly, a few observations can be made from the list of desired gifts. While it has been observed that food items are typically the most frequent gift in acts of personal appreciation (bringing in a person's favorite coffee; buying donuts, bagels, pizza or lunch; and baking or buying dessert items), gift cards are the category identified as the most desired. (Note: in our trainings with groups, participants report preferring gift cards specific to a store [restaurant, book store and hobbies or gas] more favorably than just a generic gift card). Secondly, various types of flex time/comp time are highly desired by more and more employees (paid time off, flexible hours and working remotely). Not surprisingly, employees who do not feel they are being treated well in the workplace prioritize being treated better over receiving a gift. Finally, people typically are more interested in gifts related to desired experiences (tickets to concerts, movies or sporting events) than getting more things.

Conclusion

Although tangible rewards are frequently used in employee recognition programs as reinforcers and motivators for high performance, in comparison to other ways of communicating appreciation to employees, tangible gifts has been shown to be one of the least desired languages of appreciation – typically only by 6 to 7 per cent of employees choose tangible gifts as their primary language of appreciation.

The results of this study found that no practically meaningful differences were found across gender, age range or industry setting in influencing whether employees choose tangible gifts as their primary, secondary or least valued language of appreciation (four very slight differences were found to be statistically but not practically significant).

When looking at the specific types of tangible gifts employees chose most frequently, respondents identified gift cards, additional paid time off, and gifts related to desired personal experiences as their top choices. A key message from this research is that when giving gifts to colleagues, discovering individuals' personal preferences (favorite store, restaurant, ticketed event, food, drink and lunch option) is more likely to result in a gift that "hits the mark" in showing appreciation to the recipient.

Further investigations are planned to explore related questions such as what makes receiving a gift in the workplace more or less meaningful to the recipient.

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About the authors

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