

All Jayhawks, One Nest

Building appreciation and recognition at the foundation of KU culture, one twig at a time





2026 Staff Fellows Cohort

- Craig Alexander
- Amanda Burghart
- Cady Bush
- Sam Deming
- Ashley Kalatusha
- MarSue Mackey
- Megan Maresh
- Erin McElroy
- Carol Rudolph
- Stephanie Schmitz
- Katie Williams
- Zephyr Yu
- Derek Zomer

Table of contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
DISCOVERY	6
Literature Review	6
Internal Discovery	10
External Discovery	16
FINDINGS: Recommendations to Campus Leadership	18
Building Our Nest	18
Fortifying a Sustainable Plan	19
Supporting the KU Community with Resources	20
Using AI Tools for Employee Recognition	21
Employee Recognition for Remote Workers	24
CONCLUSION	25
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	26
REFERENCES	28
APPENDICES	32
Appendix A: ThanKU Tiered Initiatives	32
Appendix B: Building the Nest Implementation Roadmap	34
Appendix C: ThanKU Recognition Toolkit and Examples	38
Appendix D: Project ShoutOut Proof of Concept	40

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE

This report analyzes employee recognition and appreciation efforts at the University of Kansas (KU).

OUR FOCUS

The 2026 Staff Fellows cohort came together to focus on Employee Recognition and Appreciation at KU. Each member accepted into the cohort came with a different background, story, and experience, but with one common understanding – the importance of valuing, appreciating, and recognizing KU staff for their important contributions to the university. One key driver was that each member of the cohort knew something needed to change if we hoped to improve campus culture for all employees, not just those in our units.

Over the past several years, KU has collected data associated with employee recognition and appreciation through a series of employee satisfaction surveys and we were tasked to dive deeper to better understand and enhance staff employee recognition practices across the university.

OUR METHODOLOGY

Throughout Spring 2026, the Cohort engaged in discovery activities including: a literature review, interviews with members of the KU Employee Recognition Committee, focus group discussions, and analysis of peer institutions in the AAU and the Big XII athletic conference.

Our findings have been summarized in this report to provide a glimpse into the current state of employee (specifically staff) satisfaction with recognition and appreciation efforts at the University. We will also describe opportunities to enhance the employee experience at KU through recognition and appreciation.

OUR FINDINGS

Through our research we found significant gaps in employee recognition and appreciation efforts across campus:

- Inconsistent, inauthentic communication of recognition and appreciation
- Lack of training on providing high-quality feedback to employees
- Unclear career advancement opportunities
- Lack of investment in employee recognition and appreciation activities

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Our discussions with mentors, campus leaders, and as a cohort have surfaced several opportunities for KU to make progress in employee recognition and appreciation. We recommend:

1. Develop a Culture of Care based on KU IRISE Values
2. Provide supplemental training for team, unit, department, and administrative leaders to understand recognition and appreciation in the workplace
3. Develop resources for leadership and peers, equipping employees to build recognition and appreciation into their daily rhythm
4. Make recognition and appreciation everyone's responsibility

DISCOVERY

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Background

Employee appreciation and recognition are central to motivation and the employee–employer relationship. To ground why recognition matters and how it shapes employee responses, the following discussion integrates three complementary perspectives. First, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs explains why, once basic workplace needs are reasonably met, recognition becomes especially motivating by addressing higher-order needs for esteem and growth (Maslow, 1943; Alajmi & Alasousi, 2019; Sadri & Bowen, 2011). Building on this motivational foundation, Social Exchange Theory explains why appreciation functions as a relational signal that elicits reciprocity, and the concept of perceived organizational support (POS) explains how repeated recognition experiences translate into broader beliefs that the organization values employees and cares about their well-being (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Maslow’s theory of motivation helps explain why employee appreciation and recognition are core drivers of motivation rather than optional “extras.” Maslow describes five levels of need (physiological, security, social/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization) and argues that individuals are motivated to satisfy their highest unmet need (Maslow, 1943; Alajmi & Alasousi, 2019). In Maslow’s hierarchy, once lower-level needs (e.g., adequate pay/working conditions and security)

are reasonably satisfied, employees are increasingly motivated by higher-order needs, especially esteem (feeling valued and respected) and self-actualization (growth and fulfillment).

In workplace settings, Maslow’s hierarchy is often used as a practical lens for understanding what motivates different employees (Sadri & Bowen, 2011). When foundational needs are met, higher-order needs become more important, making recognition practices such as specific praise, constructive feedback, awards, and visible appreciation particularly influential. In this sense, appreciation and recognition can strengthen engagement and sustained performance by directly addressing employees’ higher-order needs for esteem and growth (Alajmi & Alasousi, 2019; Sadri & Bowen, 2011).

Esteem needs: Maslow distinguishes (1) internal esteem (achievement, competence, confidence, independence) and (2) external esteem, the desire for reputation and prestige, recognition, attention, importance, and appreciation (Alajmi & Alasousi, 2019, summarizing Maslow, 1943). In organizations, appreciation and recognition are direct mechanisms for satisfying these external esteem needs by signaling that employees’ contributions are valued. Research by Sadri and Bowen (2011) reveals that lack of recognition from a direct supervisor is a major reason employ-

ees leave, and that recognition and praise can strengthen self-confidence and motivation for continued effort.

Self-actualization: Self-actualization refers to the desire for self-fulfillment: continued growth, reaching one’s potential, and striving for excellence. In the work context, supporting self-actualization requires a climate where employees are valued and respected and where learning and development are encouraged (Alajmi & Alasousi, 2019).

Taken together, Maslow’s framework highlights recognition as a mechanism through which organizations meet higher-order needs, providing the motivational foundation for social exchange relationships and POS (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Social Exchange Theory holds that relationships persist when individuals perceive a fair and positive cost-benefit balance (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Relationship quality develops through reciprocal exchanges between leaders and members of an organization. Consistent with this, Wahl et al. (2025) emphasize that appreciation is a communicative signal that can set a reciprocal process in motion, where positive work effort is met with appreciation and employees are motivated to continue their efforts. Chênevert et al. (2022) explain that HR practices (including non-monetary recognition) signal an organization’s commitment to employees; employees then feel an obligation to reciprocate with greater loyalty and reduced withdrawal.

Appreciation functions as a relational currency in this exchange:

- Leader recognition represents an investment in employees.
- In response, employees reciprocate with favorable attitudes and behaviors, such as loyalty, engagement, and discretionary effort (Wahl et al., 2025).

Thus, employee appreciation is not merely symbolic. It sustains the reciprocal exchange necessary for developing and maintaining high-quality leader–member relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) and is consistently associated with beneficial outcomes for employees and organizations across the literature (Wahl et al., 2025).

Perceived organizational support (POS) refers to employees’ general belief that their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). According to organizational support theory, employees personify the organization and interpret its actions (especially those carried out by managers and supervisors) as signals of the organization’s intentions toward them. POS is therefore not about a single policy or event, but a global perception formed over time based on cumulative experiences.

The theory emphasizes four underlying processes:

1. **Discretionary treatment:** Support is most powerful when employees believe positive treatment is voluntarily provided by the organization.
2. **Reciprocity obligations:** High POS creates a felt obligation to help the organization succeed.
3. **Socioemotional need fulfillment:** POS satisfies needs for approval, esteem, belonging, and emotional support.
4. **Performance–reward expectancies:** POS strengthens beliefs that good performance will be recognized and rewarded (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Recognition of employee contributions and opportunities for rewards contribute positively to POS, as these practices communicate that employees’ efforts are noticed, valued, and respected (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). When employees perceive recognition as discretionary (not forced by rules or external constraints), it strongly contributes to POS because it signals genuine organizational care. Because supervisors are seen as agents of the organization, appreciation ex-



pressed by supervisors is often attributed to the organization itself. As a result, supervisor recognition plays a particularly strong role in shaping POS.

In summary, employee appreciation and recognition are essential because they address employees' higher-order needs and shape how employees interpret the employment relationship. From a motivational perspective, recognition helps satisfy esteem and growth needs once basic conditions are met (Maslow, 1943; Alajmi & Alasousi, 2019; Sadri & Bowen, 2011). From a social exchange perspective, voluntary expressions of appreciation prompt employees to reciprocate with greater effort, loyalty, and reduced withdrawal (Bradler et al., 2016; Chênevert et al., 2022). Consistent with POS, repeated recognition experiences accumulate into a global belief that the organization values employees and cares about their well-being; when recognition cues are inconsistent across levels, perceived support and HR credibility may erode, increasing turnover intentions (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Chênevert et al., 2022).

The Value of Employee Appreciation and Recognition

Employee appreciation and recognition are critical organizational practices that directly influence employee retention, engagement, productivity, and overall organizational performance. Evidence across multiple studies consistently demonstrates that recognition is not merely a feel-good cultural initiative, but a practical, strategic business tool with measurable returns. Organizations that fail to implement effective recognition systems risk higher turnover, reduced morale, and diminished performance.

Recognition plays a central role in employee retention. Employees who feel valued are significantly more likely to remain with their organizations, while lack of recognition is a known contributor to disengagement and turnover intentions. Studies also show that recognition, particularly when delivered by supervisors, has

a direct impact on strengthening organizational commitment. Because replacement costs can be substantial, recognition programs represent a cost-effective method of retaining talent.

In addition to retention, recognition strongly influences employee engagement, morale, and job satisfaction. Research findings indicate that all forms of appreciation positively impact job satisfaction, with **one-on-one verbal appreciation having the greatest effect.** Employees consistently report higher motivation, improved morale, and increased commitment when recognition is provided regularly and authentically. Conversely, the absence of recognition negatively impacts wellbeing and reduces overall work quality.

Appreciation and recognition practices also directly improve performance and productivity. Research shows that even small, informal gestures of recognition can yield measurable boosts in performance by reinforcing desired behaviors and clarifying organizational expectations. Recognition functions as a communication tool, signaling what behaviors and results are valued, and encouraging employees to consistently perform at a high level.

For recognition programs to be effective, they must be **timely, specific, and fair.** Recognition delivered close to the desired behavior strengthens its impact and ensures that employees clearly understand what actions are being reinforced. Additionally, fairness and transparency are essential; programs perceived as biased or inconsistent can damage trust and reduce engagement. As such, organizations must establish clear criteria and ensure equitable access to recognition opportunities.

Leadership and management play a pivotal role in successful employee appreciation and recognition initiatives. **Supervisors are consistently identified as the most influential source of recognition,** with direct, personal communication being the most valued form. Training supervisors to deliver meaningful and timely recognition is therefore essential. Programs that rely solely on

formal awards without active leadership participation are unlikely to achieve sustained success. Effective appreciation and recognition efforts are driven by people (especially supervisors), not by the programs themselves.

A comprehensive recognition strategy should include both formal and informal elements, as well as monetary and non-monetary rewards. Informal recognition (such as verbal praise, emails, or handwritten notes) is often preferred and can be delivered frequently at low cost. Formal programs provide structure and reinforce organizational priorities. The most effective programs combine these approaches to address diverse employee preferences and motivations.

In conclusion, **employee appreciation and recognition should be viewed as a strategic priority rather than a discretionary activity.** Organizations that invest in structured, fair, and consistent recognition programs experience higher levels of employee satisfaction, improved performance, and lower turnover rates. Approving and implementing key appreciation and recognition practices will strengthen organizational effectiveness and help support meaningful employee growth.

Impact of Workplace Transparency on Employee Appreciation

Workplace transparency has become an increasingly important factor in shaping employee experiences, particularly in relation to trust, engagement, and perceptions of value. Drawing on research from Bisel and Rush (2021), Rawlins (2008, 2009), and Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2014), **this analysis examines how transparency, especially as enacted through communication, contributes to employee appreciation and recognition.** Rather than functioning as a direct recognition tool, transparency influences the relational and organizational conditions that lead employees to feel respected, included, and valued.

Bisel and Rush (2021) show that communication is the primary way transparency is created and experienced in organizations. Because commu-

nication shapes organizational reality, it directly affects whether employees feel valued and recognized. Downward communication (messages sent from managers to employees with less authority) plays a key role in shaping how employees understand their roles, expectations, and value within the organization (Bisel & Rush, 2021).

When downward communication is clear, fair, supportive, and person-centered, it improves job satisfaction and relationships while reinforcing recognition by valuing employee perspectives (Bisel & Rush, 2021). Person-centered communication involves inviting employees to share their viewpoints, acknowledging their ideas and experiences, encouraging participation in decision-making when possible, and respecting their autonomy rather than simply issuing directives. Clear and consistent downward communication also reduces uncertainty, builds trust, and strengthens employees' sense of belonging, demonstrating how transparency promotes respect, inclusion, and trust.

Similarly, Rawlins (2008) finds that transparency through participation, information sharing, accountability, and openness is strongly linked to employee trust and perceptions of goodwill and integrity. These perceptions make employees feel valued. Transparent communication demonstrates respect by sharing honest, balanced information and helping employees make informed contributions (Rawlins, 2008). When employees are invited to give feedback or take part in decisions, they feel their input matters, which reinforces recognition. Accountability, such as admitting mistakes and sharing both positive and negative information, also signals fairness and care for employees.

Rawlins (2009) goes on to connect transparency to organizational traits like integrity, openness, and respect. The quality of information (its clarity, relevance, and completeness) is key to how employees perceive their value. Transparency is more than sharing information, and organizations must allow for employees' understanding and engagement with facts and details. When employees re-



ceive clear, useful information and opportunities to participate, they feel included and empowered, which reinforces feelings of recognition (Rawlins, 2009).

Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2014) describe transparency as the quality of shared information, emphasizing disclosure, clarity, and accuracy. These elements shape employees' perceptions of an organization's trustworthiness. When organizations share information that is clear, accurate, and relevant, employees are more likely to feel safe and valued (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2014). Disclosure signals openness and integrity, clarity reflects competence and respect, and accuracy demonstrates honesty. Collectively, these behaviors signal that employees are trusted with meaningful information, representing an important form of recognition.

In summary, **workplace transparency supports employee appreciation and recognition** by:

- Showing respect through honest, balanced

communication (Rawlins, 2008; Rawlins, 2009)

- Encouraging inclusion through participation and feedback (Rawlins, 2008)
- Building trust and psychological safety through high-quality information (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2014)
- Reinforcing fairness and accountability, which signal care for employees (Rawlins, 2009)

Overall, the literature demonstrates that workplace transparency plays a critical role in fostering employee appreciation and recognition by strengthening trust, supporting inclusion, and reinforcing respectful relationships. Through clear, honest, and participatory communication, organizations signal that employees are valued contributors who deserve accountability and respect. While transparency alone does not replace formal recognition practices, it creates an essential foundation that enables employees to feel genuinely appreciated within their work environment.

INTERNAL DISCOVERY

The Staff Fellows cohort assembled teams to investigate current campus efforts related to employee recognition and appreciation, viewpoints from staff employees across the university, and historically recorded data on where the University of Kansas ranks among peers on employee recognition and appreciation.

Review of Established Survey Data

The University of Kansas has recently participated in both the COACHE (Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, Harvard University) and Docking Institute surveys to collect insights on employee satisfaction from Faculty, University Support Staff (USS) and University Professional Staff (UPS). Additionally, previous Staff Fellows

cohorts have conducted surveys that collected data relating to staff appreciation and recognition at the University of Kansas.

COACHE Survey Results

Among a group of peer institutions including: Indiana University - Bloomington, Iowa State University, State University of New York – University of Buffalo, University of Missouri – Columbia, and University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, several “Benchmarks” of employee satisfaction were assessed including Appreciation and Recognition. The results suggested KU faculty’s satisfaction rating in “Appreciation and Recognition” on a scale of 1(very dissatisfied) – 5 (very satisfied) fell from ~3.20 (2012) to ~2.80 (2022) and was noted as one area of concern. The COACHE survey

defines “area of concern” as a rating falling fifth or sixth among peers and in the bottom 30 percent of the cohort (Harvard College, 2022).

Docking Institute Results

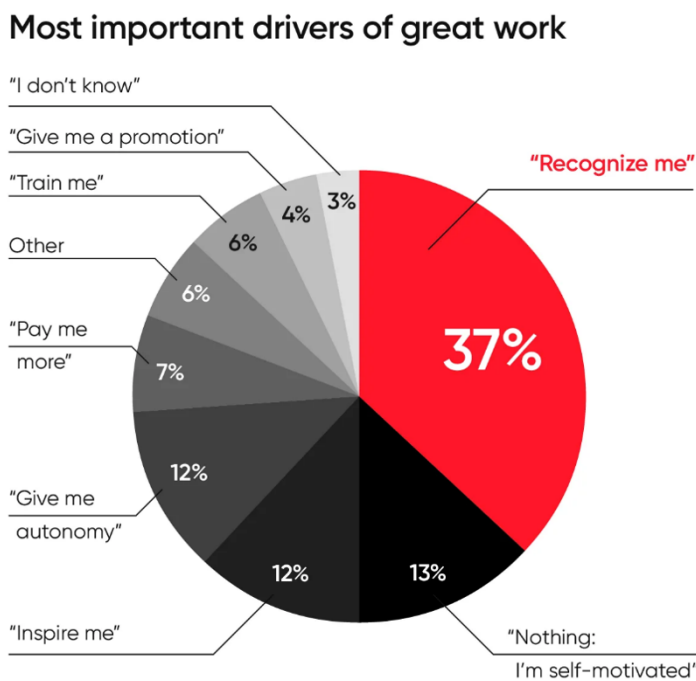
The Docking Institute report conducted in 2025 is composed of data from University Professional Staff (UPS) at all six Kansas Regent Universities, assessing employee satisfaction. When asked to rank a series of items related to “Appreciation of Work Performance”, 78% of UPS respondents and 81% of USS respondents ranked “amount of pay or compensation” as their most important item. “Recognition of Work Performed” was ranked most important by 14.3% of UPS respondents and 13.7% of USS Respondents, while 38.8% of UPS and 35.1% of USS respondents ranked it as their second most important items. Results from the University of Kansas pool were strongly aligned with the results of the compiled data from the Kansas Regent Universities.

Supplemental Data

The University of Kansas actively participates in the “Great Colleges to Work For” survey, most recently in Spring 2026. “Administered by ModernThink, [the survey] provides KU with confidential insights into workplace culture, leadership, communication, job satisfaction, professional development, and more” (University of Kansas, AIRE, 2026). This survey was open to all benefits eligible staff members on the Lawrence, Edwards and Medical Center campuses. As of the publication of this report, KU specific survey results have not yet been released.

Additionally, research by the Great Place to Work Institute, (2026) suggests that one of the “most important drivers of great work” is recognition, with 37% of respondents answering “recognize me” as their top driver (see Figure 1). “A culture of recognition develops engaged and loyal employees. Making employee appreciation integral to your workplace culture can be achieved through meaningful and intentional practices” (Hastwell, 2025).

Figure 1



Source: O.C. Tanner

Great Place to Work Institute Data on Important Drivers of Great Work

Note. Pie chart depicting the results by percentage of what employees value most in driving great work.





Data from Previous Staff Fellows Cohorts

In surveys conducted by the 2015-2016, 2016-2017, 2019-2020, and 2025 Staff Fellows cohorts, several themes emerged related to employee recognition and appreciation. These cohorts focused on professional development, mental health, community & belonging, and the IRISE values. However, upon closer examination, each survey also collected responses related to recognizing the efforts of staff and expressing appreciation are major factors contributing to the success of these areas, and the university as a whole.

Notably, the survey results suggest that staff at the University of Kansas desire:

1. More visible, consistent, and meaningful recognition
2. General support from Supervisor/Leader
3. Support for professional development
4. Opportunities to improve work-life integration (especially considering mental health)
5. A model of support stemming from senior leadership
6. Cross-campus collaboration and connection opportunities with colleagues

Reflection on Survey Data Results

These sets of survey data helped to frame how the 2026 Staff Fellows cohort looked at the status of staff recognition and appreciation at the University of Kansas. The cohort focused on identifying gaps and curating our data collection to help close these gaps and identify opportunities for meaningful change.

Employee Recognition Committee Interviews

Members of the Staff Fellows cohort interviewed five members of the Employee Recognition Committee (ERC). Each interview consisted of eleven questions to determine ERC members' thoughts about the current Employee of the Month (EOM), Employee of the Year (EOY), and Team of the

Year (TOY) processes at KU, all of which the ERC oversees.

EOM winners receive a cash award of \$750, and EOY winners receive a cash award of \$1500 ("Employees of the month & year," n.d.). While EOM and EOY winners also receive, among other things, a certificate commemorating their achievement and a write up in KU Today, interview participants acknowledged that the cash portion of these awards make them particularly valuable and valued awards for staff.

While each ERC member had their own take on the ERC and the awards that the committee oversees, several notable common themes emerged during the interviews.

What the Current ERC Processes Do Well

The ERC members who participated in the interviews believed the committee consists of a good cross-section of staff across the KU-Lawrence campus. The interview participants thought that ERC members take seriously the charge of reviewing and making decisions on nominations for the EOM, EOY, and TOY awards, and that ERC members bring to the committee a positive attitude and genuine interest in developing strong presentations for the nominees. Interview participants noted that they strive to make good and thoughtful decisions when determining EOM, EOY, and TOY winners.

Frustrations with the Current ERC Processes

Relative to the number of Unclassified Professional Staff (UPS) and University Support Staff (USS) employed by KU, the ERC receives a very small number of nominations for both the EOM and TOY awards (the EOY awards are selected from EOM winners for the previous year). In both cases, interview participants were aware of employees and teams who deserved recognition but were not nominated for the EOM or TOY awards. The participants suggested that this could be due to a lack of awareness of these programs in the KU-Lawrence community.

The ERC is limited, by funding, scope, and capacity, to overseeing the EOM, EOY, and TOY awards. This means that of the thousands of staff and numerous teams doing exceptional and noteworthy work on the KU-Lawrence campus alone, only 24 staff members will win EOM, of those 24 only 2 will win EOY, and only one team will win TOY. While these awards are valuable and valued, interview participants agreed that the EOM, EOY, and TOY awards alone cannot comprise the entirety of a university-wide staff recognition program.

Friction Points with the Current ERC Processes

Interview participants identified lengthy nomination forms as a potential barrier for nominating an employee or team for EOM or TOY. Both forms consist of several open-ended questions and request specific examples of exceptional work. The responses to the questions on the nomination forms are very helpful to the committee, especially the specific examples, but interview participants observed that filling out a long form, especially one requesting a significant amount of detail, may be challenging for some people who would otherwise nominate someone.

Participants mentioned that staff only learn they were nominated if they win. If a staff member is nominated but doesn't win, the staff member never learns about the nomination.

Interview participants also remarked that ERC membership requires a time commitment. Each committee member researches at least one, and sometimes two or three, nominations each quarter. This research includes reviewing the original nomination form and reaching out to the supervisor and recommended additional references for more information. Some nominations include several additional references, so this part of the research can be time-consuming. The ERC member then summarizes the information they've gathered to present to the rest of the committee. This presentation is what the full ERC will hear on the nominee, requiring the presenting ERC member to dedicate significant time to develop the summary thoroughly and intentionally to portray the nominee in the best light. Finally, while the

ERC only meets quarterly, each meeting is scheduled for three and a half hours and often lasts the full meeting time. All committee members are volunteers doing committee work in addition to their regular jobs. More than one interviewee voiced concerns that they couldn't give the process the time and attention it deserves.

Recommendations for the Current ERC Processes

Overall, interview participants believed that the current ERC processes are valuable but that expansion of employee recognition for staff is necessary.

The final question of each interview was, "If there isn't budget for 'cash' award recognition on a broad KU recognition program, what do you think people would find most meaningful?" All interview participants replied with suggestions, many of which appear Appendix C of this document.

Interview participants were quick to note that expansion of employee recognition does not – and should not, due to the limited scope of the current ERC and the limited capacity of its members – rest completely on the ERC's shoulders. Rather, expanded employee recognition can be implemented in coordination with other campus partners or teams or at the department, unit, and team levels, as well, to supplement current and future university-wide processes.

Interview participants suggested increasing awareness of the EOM, EOY, and TOY awards to get more nominations. KU Human Resources (HR) maintains a web page devoted to employee growth that lists several employee recognition opportunities, including EOM, EOY, and TOY ("Employee Recognition Ceremony", n.d.). This page includes information about the awards and links to the EOM and TOY nomination forms, but it is most easily accessible to KU community members who already know the awards exist and where to find information on them. KU HR also provides information via KU email publications, including Campus Insider and the KU HR website (University of Kansas – Office of the Provost, 2026.; "Employees of the month winners," n.d.).



At the same time, interview participants acknowledge a current challenge with the email communication approach: it relies on recipients opening the emails they receive. This challenge then leads to a question that deserves further consideration and action: how else can we communicate these opportunities to the KU community? One interview participant recounted creating PowerPoint slides for a large event that described the ERC, what the committee does, and the awards they oversee, and wondered if more opportunities, beyond email, existed for sharing information about the current ERC awards.

Interview participants also recommended notifying any staff member who was nominated for an award, even if they did not win the award, noting that the nomination itself is a form of appreciation that could still be impactful for the nominee.

Staff Focus Groups

In the span of two weeks, members of the Staff Fellows cohort conducted five focus group sessions, held both in-person and virtually, to assess the status of employee recognition and appreciation at the University of Kansas, and collect ideas and opportunities for change across all university levels. Participants included staff and non-faculty staff supervisors representing a wide variety of units across campus.

Guidelines

To promote consistent discussion across all groups, focus group facilitators shared common discussion guidelines with each group. These guidelines were as follows:

- This feedback will serve as the primary source of qualitative data in our final report and presentation on staff appreciation. We will be looking at trends and generalized areas of strength and improvement. Your feedback will remain anonymous, and we will not share specific examples unless you give permission
- We would like to focus on areas of appreciation outside of salaries/monetary compensation

- Please be respectful of the ideas and experiences of others
- General areas of growth and improvement are very helpful for these conversations, but specific issues should be addressed through your supervisor or HR
- You are welcome to share examples from positions outside of KU, both positive and negative, but we would like to focus primarily on what the University is doing well and where there could be improvements

These guidelines were developed to help staff focus on opportunities to help them have increased overall satisfaction in their roles on campus. Knowing the significant pressure the University is facing surrounding finances, it was critical for this Staff Fellows cohort to identify opportunities for change that would require funding, as well as those that would not.

Summary

It was clear across all five groups that staff are interested in change that directly translates into improved recognition and appreciation efforts, not just from immediate supervisors, but from university leadership. Many reflected that the University of Kansas lacks the structural support, consistency, and cultural investment necessary to create a sustainable practice of recognition and appreciation. However, when asked, **“What ways has KU (either at the University level or at the office/unit level) provided appreciation and recognition that felt genuine and has a positive impact?”** participants shared several examples.

“[My supervisor] would send [staff members] a note on their hire date thanking them for their work.”

“It’s really nice when people beyond our office appreciate the work that we do”

“Every week at staff meeting, [a staff member who] holds HeiHei (a symbol of good work) gets to pass HeiHei along to someone else for good work that they’ve done.”

“You can’t always get employee of the month,

but you can be shown in little ways that you're appreciated."

These statements highlight the efforts around recognition and appreciation that are happening around campus, but a lack of consistency across units.

To help us identify gaps, participants were asked **"Where do you see the biggest gaps in staff appreciation, whether in a lack of appreciation or in efforts that do not have a positive impact?"**. Staff shared many sentiments including a lack of public recognition of staff member achievements in campus newsletters, disproportionate opportunities for awards compared to students and faculty, feedback that goes unrecognized, and a feeling of invisibility until problems surface. Many remote and hybrid participants also noted that they often are not included in team gatherings since they are not in proximity to campus. These gaps pose a potential threat to long-term employee satisfaction and retention.

Focus group participants were also given the opportunity to volunteer examples **"from their work at KU, when a lack of appreciation/recognition OR a failed attempt at appreciation/recognition negatively impacted their experience."**

"I was expecting more of a welcome and 'hope you never leave' type of environment from KU, since previously I had worked for the federal government. ...I figured working for the top university in the state would have more...staff recognition... to retain a great workforce..."

"I created an employee manual/handbook for my position. They did not appreciate my efforts and time. When I left the department, several directors expressed that I didn't do that much for them. They talked down to me..."

"The director for a unit I worked in once jokingly told staff she was going to develop a 'crying room'. ...It's staggeringly insensitive to make a nonchalant joke at your staff's expense with no expectation of yourself to fix the problems."

Core Themes

While each focus group took on a unique identity, across all five focus groups, ten common themes surfaced.

1. Appreciation is highly dependent on local leadership rather than institutional culture
2. Staff want structural support, not just symbolic recognition
3. Supervisor quality strongly shapes employee morale and recognition
4. Supervisor and leadership training is a major institutional need
5. Staff frequently feel invisible or undervalued institutionally
6. Recognition must feel genuine, personal, and authentic
7. Communication, transparency, and feeling heard matter deeply
8. Recognition systems across KU are fragmented and difficult to navigate
9. Professional development is viewed as meaningful appreciation
10. Staff want long-term culture change, not one-time initiative

Collectively, these themes indicate that staff desire consistent and sustainable recognition and appreciation efforts across the institution, training for supervisory staff, and simplification of recognition opportunities.

Reflection

One participant said, "Small praise goes a long ways in giving employees greater confidence. It tells the employee that efforts are noticed, appreciated, and bring a sense of well-being and enthusiasm to the work day". This sentiment was shared across supervisors and non-supervisory staff alike. The focus group process surfaced many unknown appreciation and recognition practices around campus, many that are quietly observed amongst a team, department, or unit. These efforts showcase the possibility that a culture of recognition and appreciation is attainable at the University of Kansas.

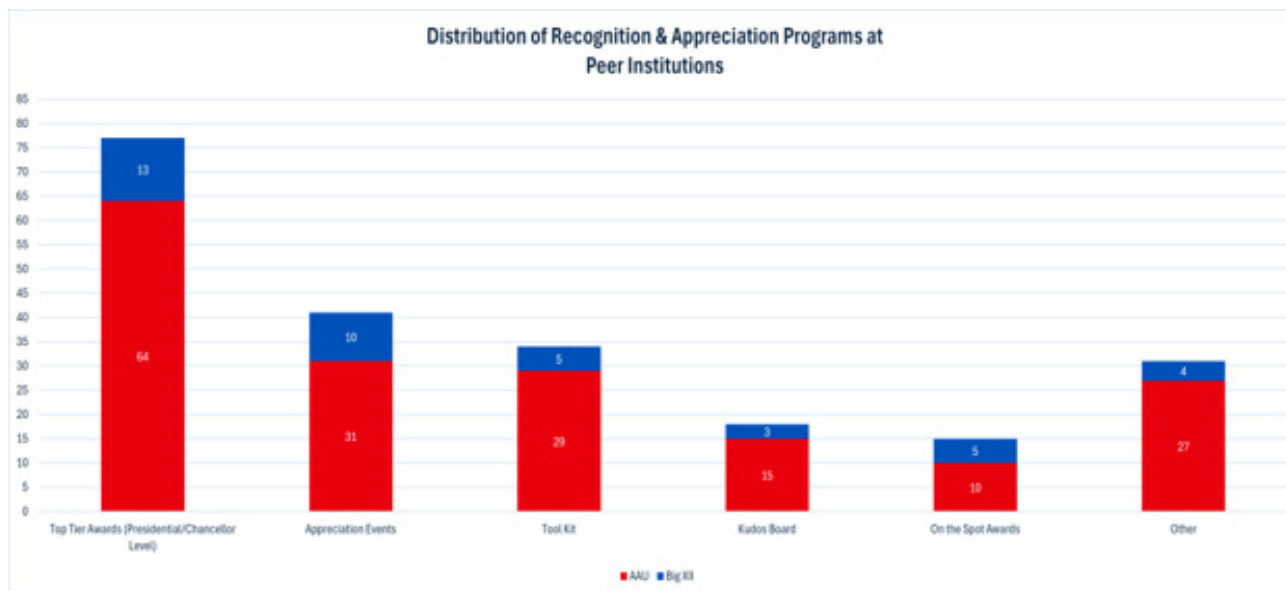
EXTERNAL DISCOVERY

Examination of Peer Institutions

The 2026 Staff Fellows cohort looked to peer institutions to assess the current adoption of recognition and appreciation programs across top universities. Of our peers in the Association of American Universities (AAU) and the Big XII Athletic Conference, 80 total institutions (66 AAU institutions, 11 Big XII institutions, and 3 institutions in both the AAU and Big XII) most institutions have established some form of staff appreciation, featuring awards for years of service and Presidential or Chancellor level awards. Of the

institutions with the most robust program examples, several expanded their offerings to include a toolkit, online kudos boards, appreciation events (i.e., cookouts, game tickets, discounts at local merchants, etc.), a recognition portal, governance awards, and established a staff recognition committee. Based on these offerings, we identified five features of these programs to analyze: Top Tier Awards (Presidential or Chancellor level), Appreciation Events, Employee Recognition Tool Kit, Kudos Board, and On the Spot Awards. We also noted institutions that provided additional or different features noted as Other (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



Distribution of Recognition & Appreciation Programs at Peer Institutions

Note. Stacked bar graph comparing total number of institutions in the AAU and Big XII Conference offering Recognition & Appreciation programs including select features.

Peer Examples, Policy

The University of North Carolina (UNC), Chapel Hill, developed a Departmental Recognition policy aimed to “promote employee morale through departmental recognition programs”, and “motivate employee initiative and excellence” (Human Resources, University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, 2026). This policy provides guidance and

details for departments on how to establish a recognition program and officially recognize employees in their department, guidelines on award eligibility and publicity of recipients, guidelines on monetary awards, and paid time off awards.

Similarly, The University of California (UC) system initiated their Incentive and Recognition Award Plans policy in December 2018, also developed

“to motivate individuals or teams to produce results...and to reward them for achieving stated performance objectives” (Human Resources, University of California, 2023). This policy also establishes guidelines for development of an incentive award program, implementation and governance of the program, and conditions awardees must meet.

Peer Examples, Career Pathways

Through our focus group conversations, we heard from staff at all levels that there is limited opportunity for advancement in their role at the University of Kansas. While these statements can be partially tied to compensation, raises, and on-campus costs (i.e. food, parking), this doesn't tell the whole story. Several staff mentioned that they enjoy their role, department, or unit, but in many cases, they must choose between staying stagnant or career (and skill) advancement.

The University of Rochester in New York has implemented their “Career Pathways Program” to promote staff growth & development (Human Resources, University of Rochester, 2026). This program provides full-time staff an opportunity to expand their skills to meet the requirements of “high-demand positions” on campus, enhancing the already existing tuition benefit program. This example shows an intentional investment in high-value staff and promotes retention.

Peer Examples, Tool Kit

Also, amongst our focus groups, it was clear that supervisors don't always know how to show recognition and appreciation in a way that staff find genuine and authentic. An employee recognition toolkit can help address this problem by providing supervisors (staff and faculty) with multiple ideas and prompts to help them show their appreciation and ensure that the message is received well by their staff.

AAU peer Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech) has developed and implemented their Employee Recognition Toolkit, a premier example our cohort referenced in developing a starter toolkit for the University of Kansas (Appendix C). “When done well, recognition strengthens engagement, connects effort to impact, and builds a culture where people feel valued and motivated” (Human Resources, Georgia Institute of Technology, 2026). In their toolkit, Georgia Tech separates recognition into two categories, Leaders and Peers. Since both play a fundamental but unique role in establishing a recognition culture in their unit, providing separate toolkits is essential.

The Leader Recognition Toolkit helps leaders identify what types of actions and behaviors they should be looking for and recognizing staff for, develop a regular practice of giving recognition in a variety of ways, and build the habit of creating their unique recognition culture. The toolkit also emphasizes different recognition efforts and impact levels to help guide leaders to the best option for recognizing staff members.

In contrast, the Peer Recognition Toolkit aims to build a recognition culture by through “belonging, trust, and teamwork” (Human Resources, Georgia Institute of Technology, 2026). Our focus group team found that across several units, a staff member's team knows and respects their work. It is the supervisors, leaders, and teams outside that staff member's immediate workspace that lack knowledge of the important work they are doing. This is supported by the design of this toolkit example, which encourages peers to share their support individually or in team meetings, which helps staff members' efforts feel seen.

FINDINGS:

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CAMPUS LEADERSHIP

The following recommendations have been compiled through the various efforts of the 2026 Staff Fellows cohort to gather information from our peers across the University of Kansas.

BUILDING OUR NEST

“KU has a responsibility beyond that of the supervisor to make sure that [employees] feel recognized.” – Focus Group Participant

Appreciation and recognition are often tied to a conversation involving increased compensation or benefits. However, simply paying more or providing additional perks doesn't tell the whole story. We have found that across the university, from facilities to administrative roles, supervisors to support staff, it is just as important to show appreciation and recognition for staff in small ways.

For example, one focus group participant shared, “My supervisor will unexpectedly share her [appreciation] for me and my work. It is small and costs nothing, but it always stays with me”. Sometimes taking the time to say “thanks” or “great work” can dramatically change the culture of a team and the satisfaction of staff when delivered authentically. While simple, these small gestures are often forgotten in the busy work environments we find ourselves in at the University of Kansas. From our work, we recommend the University consider investing in developing a culture of care. This investment will not only provide meaningful change now, but over time has the potential to impact productivity and efficiency in

a positive way.

Some staff also shared a desire to incorporate personal connections with colleagues. One focus group participant shared, “everything you can do to build community is really important”. While building community can look different across teams and units, this is a goal worth striving for. Examples can include opportunities to share non-work interests or hobbies at staff meetings, allowing staff to express themselves and learn about each other, or promoting staff gatherings that focus on getting to know each other instead of discussion of work tasks. “Employees who feel connected and supported are more likely to collaborate effectively, share knowledge, and work towards common goals” (Chronus, 2026).

Finally, it is important for staff to be encouraged and provided space to engage in opportunities for professional development, community building, and skills development. The KU Human Resources department provides several opportunities for staff to connect and build community including the Staff Leadership Summit held each fall, the newly established Staff Professional Development conference, the Employee Wellness Fair, Move-N-Learn's, and many others. The Office of Civil Rights and Title IX offers the Rapport series, and

the online Belonging at KU series, aimed at “creating opportunities for connection and building intentional spaces for networking and belonging” (KU Office of Civil Rights and Title IX, 2026). The monthly “Thank Goodness it’s Thursday” (TGIT) gatherings host an opportunity to bring staff together for networking. All these examples prove there are efforts being made to create spaces that allow staff to build connections across campus. Other opportunities to consider include creating space for staff to help develop skills they can use in their role and build community. KU’s Tuition Assistance for Employees program, LinkedIn Learning, wellness programs through HealthQuest

and the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), free online training or certification programs, and more are excellent opportunities to help staff perform in their role. However, for staff in office spaces where they are the only staff member or one of only a few staff members on their team, many staff do not see an option to attend these events without encouragement from their supervisors. It would be this group’s recommendation that supervisors empower their staff members to explore these opportunities and allow for open discussions on options for attending in balance with regular office responsibilities.

FORTIFYING A SUSTAINABLE PLAN FOR EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION AND APPRECIATION

There are already many efforts in place to help foster a community at the University of Kansas where staff feel appreciated and recognized for the work they contribute to the success of students, administrators, researchers, and other staff. However, it is clear that these efforts alone are not doing enough. By establishing and creating a sustainable plan focused on employee recognition and appreciation, we recommend the adoption of tools that can support building a plan for ongoing recognition and appreciation efforts.

Through feedback from focus group participants, research, and personal experiences, the 2026 Staff Fellows cohort has compiled an initial version of the ThankKU Toolkit (see Appendix C). This toolkit is intended to equip staff supervisors and peers with ways they can integrate recognition and appreciation efforts into their workplace, easily. Tools like this toolkit provide supervisors and peers with accessible support to promote a culture of care towards their staff and coworkers. As time continues and more knowledge is gathered surrounding staff appreciation and recog-

nition, it is key that the toolkit and other support materials be regularly examined for accuracy and updated as needed. Looking ahead, it is crucial that groups assigned the responsibility of maintaining a university culture of appreciation and recognition create innovative ways to continue engagement with staff long-term, developing a sustainable plan and maintaining a high-quality level of care across the university. The Implementation Roadmap (Appendix B) lays out how various elements of the toolkit and additional recommendations can be developed and shared to the institution. We recommend that those who take on the responsibilities of staff recognition and appreciation further develop an implementation plan. The 2026 Staff Fellows Cohort has unanimously agreed and would like to be a part of future conversations on implementation progress.

We also emphasize the importance of engaging all employees in recognition and appreciation. This may naturally surface as a supervisor’s or leader’s responsibility, however, this cohort believes that all employees of the University of Kansas have a



responsibility to recognize and appreciate the work their colleagues do. By implementing tools that make this task an enjoyable, simple part of

the workday, the impact can quickly spread, leaving lasting positive change.

SUPPORTING THE KU COMMUNITY WITH RESOURCES

“A lot of faculty who come in to [supervise] staff...have no idea how to do that or what to do.”

“I don’t recall there being any piece of [supervisor training] around recognition.”

“How do we train those...in leadership positions to [improve] connecting and engaging with the [staff] below them?”

-Focus Group Participants

Overwhelmingly, our focus groups identified training as a fundamental gap for leaders on the KU campus. More profoundly, it was staff supervisors who shared a strong desire for training to help them create an environment their staff want to work in. We recommend integrating training on recognition for all supervisors and leaders. While not every leader has the natural instinct of incorporating recognition and appreciation efforts, it should be an expectation of all leaders at the University of Kansas to adopt a posture of care towards their staff. Supporting staff supervisors with development resources that educate them on how to implement recognition and appreciation techniques, that support wellbeing of their staff and team, only amplifies that team’s potential for productivity. The Supervisory Training for Excellence in Performance (STEP) course would be an opportunity to either incorporate resource materials or training to new supervisors as they begin their new roles, as well as provide ongoing training to established supervisors.

As a cohort, we have discovered simple and accessible ways to incorporate a posture of appreciation and recognition into a regular habit in the workplace. Some of these tools already exist in licensed software including Viva Insights Praise within Microsoft Outlook and Teams. Praise is a built-in feature designed to promote recognition to employees and coworkers (Microsoft Corporation, 2026). Praise also allows users to set reminders to send praise and track their history and trends supporting habit development. Other considerations include using artificial intelligence tools like Copilot to help overcome creative blocks, when used thoughtfully, and incorporating localized recognition ceremonies for employees in a unit or department.

Tools can be developed in-house as well to assist with employee appreciation and recognition. A member of our cohort developed a custom platform that dynamically generates an appreciation message tailored to specific KU IRISE values. Please see Appendix D for a proof of concept and behavioral data analysis of this platform.

We also encourage increased communication and investment in the Employee of the Month award program and the Employee Recognition Ceremony to reward these achievements, especially for long tenure service. It must also be considered that those who are nominated but not awarded receive communication acknowledging their impact on the University.

USING AI TOOLS FOR EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION

Even the most cursory review of approaches to employee recognition and appreciation demonstrates the interest in leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) to assist with employee recognition processes. Vendors of employee recognition and rewards solutions are promoting their AI features or integrability with tools such as Microsoft Copilot, while Microsoft themselves have developed an Awards and Recognition Copilot agent to streamline recognition processes (“Wipro increases the impact”, n.d.; “AI built to strengthen”, n.d.; Microsoft Power Platform, 2025). Some higher education institutions also recognize the benefits of AI in this context, creating documentation covering how to utilize Copilot for employee recognition (“Using Copilot”, n.d.).

While much academic research has been conducted on the wide variety of applications of predictive AI, the study of the use of generative artificial intelligence (gen AI) is a relatively new field. As a result, only a limited number of peer-reviewed articles on the use of gen AI in any context exist currently. Peer-reviewed literature directly related to gen AI in employee recognition contexts is even rarer, so a literature review must focus on applications of gen AI in contexts related to employee recognition, including communications and human resource management.

The literature acknowledges the utility of both predictive and generative AI in many applications, including supporting HRM functions such as job applicant screening and employee shift scheduling and technology tools such as spam filters and search engines. At the same time, recommendations on the use of AI in many contexts, including HRM and communications, vary widely between articles.

Current research makes recommendations on AI use based either on their own literature reviews or on data collected from research studies.

The most conservative approach, based on a

literature review, recommends avoiding reliance on AI. Tools like ChatGPT and Copilot rely on large language models (LLMs) to generate responses to prompts. LLMs, while more accurate than other AI tools, such as random forests or linear models, are also so complex that the engineers developing and maintaining the models cannot understand the models in their entirety. Comparing unexpected results from a complex AI model to unexpected results from a simpler computer program or AI model, the author argues that while a developer can identify and mitigate the root cause of the unexpected results in a simpler program or AI model, the same is not possible with highly complex AI models such as LLMs. As a result, these models cannot be controlled and should not be relied upon (Carabantes, 2020).

The most liberal approach, based on a research study, supports expanded use of gen AI in human resources and gratitude messaging contexts. The study found that, when presented with human-authored and AI-generated employee appreciation messages, the participants preferred the AI-generated messages. Participants were also divided into two groups, a group to study giving feedback and a group to study receiving feedback. The group giving feedback received AI coaching on prefabricated employee appreciation messages. The study found that 79% of participants reported learning from the coaching and 63.5% would apply the coaching to change the prefabricated messages. Generally, participants in the giving feedback group also agreed that the coaching was in line with HR industry best practices. Participants in the group receiving feedback were randomly given either human-authored or AI-generated messages and responded that the AI-generated messages aligned with HR industry best practices. The study’s authors also note that their findings are consistent with current research on gen AI use in other contexts, such as mental health and customer service (Hatch, et al., 2026).

Other literature recommends a more moderate

approach. A research study of the effects of AI use, real or perceived, on customer response to marketing messages, found that if customers know or believe an emotional marketing message, such as an encouraging follow-up email, to be AI-generated, they will respond with reduced positive word of mouth (PMOW) and brand loyalty and increased moral disgust. Moral disgust is a response to “violations of moral norms, such as unethical behavior or immoral actions” (Kirk & Givi, 2025, p. 3). and results in customers moving away from the organization they believe to be inauthentic. The cumulative effect is known as the “AI-authorship effect”. The AI-authorship effect can be mitigated when emotional marketing messages are human-authored and AI-edited. The study also emphasizes that the customer must perceive the message as authentic, advising that the AI-authorship effect may be reduced if “using AI does not change a consumer’s belief that the communicator genuinely feels the emotions being expressed” (Kirk & Givi, 2025, p. 3). The paper’s findings contribute to the developing body of research on using generative AI tools to author or edit communications and likely can be applied outside of the marketing realm to use cases such as using gen AI to develop employee appreciation messages.

A second literature review acknowledges current concerns with AI use, including bias in training data, algorithms, and output and the use of AI tools outside their intended purpose. This review proposes a framework for the ethical use of AI comprised of organizational-level values-setting, ethical task-technology fit, and level of human control. Within this framework, AI implementation begins with an organizational body “setting, monitoring, and adapting parameters for AI use and oversighting the collection and management of data” (Bankins, 2021, p. 843). From there, AI tools can be assessed by the parameters set by the organizing body for ethical task-technology fit and levels of human control. Assessing an AI tool for ethical task-technology fit includes such tasks as determining whether the tool is a good fit for the data it will use and whether it is a good match for the tasks it is implemented to complete.

Assessing levels of human control determines how much human interaction is required – does a human need to change or review AI output, or is it sufficient to allow the AI to complete tasks without any human oversight? (See Fig 3., following page)

While the study’s author is clear that the framework is far from prescriptive, ethical AI frameworks do exist that can be adopted and adapted as appropriate to guide the use of AI in HR overall and employee recognition specifically. One such example provided in the article was the AI4People framework, where AI must adhere to five principles to be ethical: beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, justice, and explicability (Bankins, 2021).

Because research on gen AI application is nascent, there are opportunities for further research in general and especially around employee recognition. Based on the analyses done via literature review and review of AI tools currently available at KU, we recommend making use of the AI tools we have but retaining a human touch. Gen AI especially can certainly be helpful when developing employee recognition messages, to the point that one institution, The University of Texas at Arlington, has published guidelines for using Copilot in creating appreciation messages (“Using Copilot”, n.d.), but we recommend human review and consideration when sharing these messages. As the studies we’ve reviewed have indicated, while AI use can be positively received, if it is detected or perceived to replace human sentiment and originality, it is less likely to have the intended positive effect that an appreciation message should have. While some AI tools are already implemented on campus that can be used in the generation of employee appreciation messages, due to the sensitive nature of HR data, we recommend considering an ethical framework if more AI tools are implemented around employee recognition.

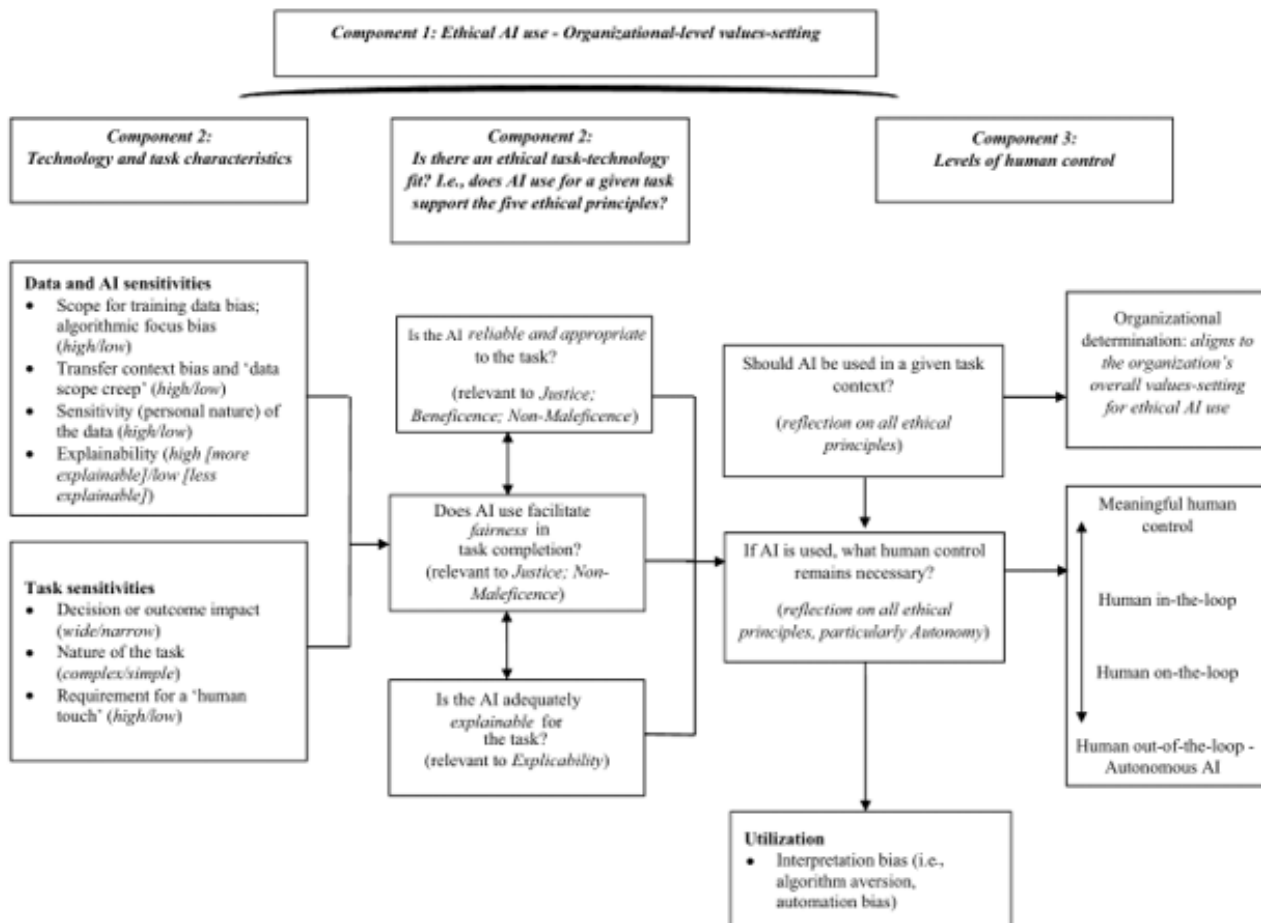
A major AI tool available currently to KU staff is Copilot, which can be used to generate appreciation messages or related tools. We used Copilot to create a “Get to know you” form that allowed

each employee to specify the types of recognition and appreciation they find most impactful. Then, taking the information from this form, a supervisor can give Copilot a prompt such as, “Give me 10 creative ways I could recognize an individual with these answers to the questions,” to get ideas for recognition and appreciation tailored to that individual. For a supervisor encountering a creativity block, Copilot can provide a starting point

for idea generation.

While AI tools are readily available and can be helpful, it is vital to approach staff appreciation and recognition holistically. A variety of tools, including non-AI ones, should be developed and utilized to implement and improve employee appreciation and recognition at individual, team, department, and institutional levels.

Figure 3



From Bankins (2021), a Sample Ethical Framework for Assessing AI in HR Contexts

Note. A visual representation of the ethical framework for AI adoption discussed in Bankins (2021), including a flow chat showing questions to ask when considering adding AI to a task.



EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION FOR REMOTE WORKERS

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) began tracking remote work in their Current Population Survey in October 2022 and has made data available from October 2022 through April 2026 at the time of this report, with only the October 2025 data missing. In that time, the percentage of persons who spent at least a portion of their time working remotely ranged from 17.9% to 23%, with an overall average of 20.8%. Of workers who did any amount of remote work, the percentage who worked all hours remotely ranged from 45.5% to 55.1%, with an average of 49.2%. The most recent numbers, from April 2026, indicated that 21.7% of employed persons worked remotely for at least some of their work hours, and of these workers, 48% worked all hours remotely (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2026a; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2026b). While the same data is not publicly available for KU, many departments have employees that have hybrid or fully remote work arrangements. As the hybrid and remote workers who participated in the Staff Fellows focus groups noted, employees who spend part or all of their time working remotely may need additional consideration to ensure they feel included and

appreciated within their team, department or unit, and KU as a whole.

As such, members of the Staff Fellows cohort sought peer-reviewed literature on recognition for remote workers specifically and found very little. This could be because the dramatic increase in remote work is a relatively recent phenomenon, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing guidelines. Current literature, while quite sparse, has so far found that remote employees have similar appreciation preferences to onsite workers, with remote workers tending to rank quality time higher and words of affirmation lower as appreciation strategies when compared with onsite workers. It's worth noting that current literature showed that both onsite and remote workers strongly preferred both quality time and words of affirmation over other appreciation strategies (White, 2018). Due to the very small current body of research, there are ample opportunities in this area for further study, and with about one-fifth of workers nationally spending at least a portion of their time working remotely, it is an area worth investigating as well.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the process of creating this report, the thirteen members of the 2026 Staff Fellows cohort exemplified dedication to and investment of time in the University of Kansas. We all shared the mission of creating an environment where all staff across our institution feel cared for, appreciated, and recognized.

In summary, our research suggests that employee recognition and appreciation promote increased engagement, performance and retention. While it is clear that the University has made strides to improve the culture of recognition and appreciation in a meaningful way, there are still significant gaps which leave staff frustrated and unsatisfied in their roles. Survey data and focus group feedback consistently report that staff desire more authentic and meaningful recognition, and clear pathways to grow professionally.

In review of our peer institutions, KU has opportunity to expand efforts and resources such as more robust programs, tools, and policies that support a strong and resilient culture of recognition and appreciation.

Investing in employee recognition and appreciation not only impacts cultural change but is a root of long-term stability of the KU workforce. Staff contributions greatly matter and are the backbone of many university processes. Each staff member deserves a workplace where their contributions are seen, and they are supported by leadership and peers and encouraged in their daily tasks.

For our Jayhawk community, it is mission-critical that we build a nest that helps them to soar and carry on the KU legacy. The 2026 Staff Fellows cohort wants to recognize the hard work of our colleagues, departments, and the KU community for their thoughts, ideas, and contributions to this work.

ThanKU and Rock Chalk!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ThanKU to all the campus leaders who supported our work along the way as an individual mentor, leadership speaker or program sponsor.

Dr. Doug Girod, Chancellor

Dr. Mary Banwart, Associate Vice Provost for Faculty Development, Mentoring, and Growth, the Office of Faculty Affairs

Cinnamon Blair, Chief Strategic Communication Office and Vice Chancellor

Mike Broadwell, Executive Director of the Office of Administrative Services, KU Libraries

Mike Denning, Assistant Vice Chancellor for National Defense Initiatives

Dr. Tammara Durham, Vice Provost for Student Affairs

Kim Grunewald, J.D., Chief Legal Officer, General Counsel, and Vice Chancellor

Jason Hornberger, Vice Provost for Finance

Lauren Jones McKown, J.D., Vice Chancellor for the Office of Civil Rights and Title IX

Derek Kwan, Executive Director of the Lied Center

Callie Long, Vice Chancellor for Operations

Angie Loving, Vice Chancellor for Human Resources

Nelson Mosley, Chief of Police, KU Police Department

Dr. Amy Mendenhall, Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs

Saralyn Reece Hardy, Director of the Spencer Museum of Art

Jeff Chasen, J.D., Assistant Vice Chancellor for Human Resources

Kendra Ikenberry, Learning & Development Specialist, KU Human Resources

Paul Mintner, Learning & Development Manager, KU Medical Center

An honorable mention goes to our colleague **Pegah Jimenez** for her contributions during the initial phases of this project, despite stepping away before its conclusion.



REFERENCES

AI built to strengthen connection, not replace it. (n.d.). Motivosity. Retrieved June 4, 2026, from <https://www.motivosity.com/platform/appreciation-intelligence>

Alajmi, B., & Alasousi, H. (2018). Understanding and motivating academic library employees: Theoretical implications. *Library Management*, 40(3–4), 203–214. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LM-10-2017-0111>

American Management Association (2019, July 16). “If You’ve Got ’Em, Keep ’Em.” Amanet.org, American Management Association. www.amanet.org/articles/if-youve-got-em-keep-em/

Bankins Sarah. (2021). The ethical use of artificial intelligence in human resource management: a decision-making framework. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 23(4), 841–854. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-021-09619-6>

Bisel, R. S., & Rush, K. A. (2021). Communication in organizations. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of psychology*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190236557.013.866>

Bradler, C., Dur, R., Neckermann, S., & Non, A. (2016). Employee recognition and performance: A field experiment. *Management Science*, 62(11), 3085–3099. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2015.2291>

Bradler, Christiane, et al. (2013). “Employee Recognition and Performance: A Field Experiment.” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, vol. 62, no. 11, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2256482>.

Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2026a, June 3). Percent of persons who teleworked, Persons who teleworked all hours. *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey*. <https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNU0201BE23>

Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2026b, June 3). Percent, Persons who teleworked. *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey*. <https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNU0201B46B>

Carabantes, M. (2020). Black-box artificial intelligence: an epistemological and critical analysis. *AI & Society*, 35(2), 309–317. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-019-00888-w>

Carter, Joanna (2023). "The Effect of Employee Appreciation Methods on Job Satisfaction of Higher Education Support Staff." ScholarWorks. scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations/11643/

Chênevert, D., Hill, K., & Kilroy, S. (2022). Employees' perceptions of non-monetary recognition practice and turnover: Does recognition source alignment and contrast matter? *Human Resource Management Journal*, 32(1), 40–57. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12354>

Chronus (n.d.). The Impact of Community at Work. Chronus, LLC. Accessed June 2, 2026, from <https://chronus.com/community-at-work>

Docking Institute of Public Affairs (2022). 2022 Regent Universities USS-UPS Survey. Docking Institute of Public Affairs at Fort Hays State University.

Employee of the month winners. (n.d.). Human Resources. Retrieved June 4, 2026, from <https://humanresources.ku.edu/employee-month-winners>

Employee recognition ceremony and service awards. (n.d.). Retrieved June 4, 2026, from <https://humanresources.ku.edu/employee-recognition>

Employees of the month & year. (n.d.). Human Resources. Retrieved June 4, 2026, from <https://humanresources.ku.edu/employee-month>

Georgia Institute of Technology (n.d.). Culture of recognition. Human Resources, Georgia Institute of Technology. Accessed May 28, 2026, from <https://engagement.hr.gatech.edu/culture-of-recognition/#leader-recognition>

Graen, G. B., & Uhl-Bien, M. (1995). Relationship-based approach to leadership: Development of leader–member exchange (LMX) theory of leadership over 25 years: Applying a multi-level multi-domain perspective. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 6(2), 219–247. [https://doi.org/10.1016/1048-9843\(95\)90036-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/1048-9843(95)90036-5)

Great Place to Work Institute (n.d.). Employee Appreciation Day: Celebrate your team's success. Great Place to Work. Accessed May 28, 2026, from <https://www.greatplacetowork.com/employee-appreciation-day>

Hastwell, C. (2025, August 22). Employee Recognition: What it is, how to do it right, and different ways to do it. Great Place to Work. Accessed May 28, 2026, from <https://www.greatplacetowork.com/resources/blog/creating-a-culture-of-recognition>

Hatch, S. G., Dalessandro, C., Topham, B., Patterson, D., Berry, C., Johnson, J. J., & Lovell, A. (2026). Thanks a Bot: Leveraging Artificial Intelligence for Improved Workplace Appreciation. *SAGE Open*, 16(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440251414704>

Kirk, C. P., & Givi, J. (2025). The AI-authorship effect: Understanding authenticity, moral disgust, and consumer responses to AI-generated marketing communications. *Journal of Business Research*, 186, 114984. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2024.114984>



Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370–396. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>

Masri, Nadine El, and Abubakr Suliman. (2019, April 1). “Talent Management, Employee Recognition and Performance in the Research Institutions.” *Studies in Business and Economics*, vol. 14, no. 1, 127–140.

Microsoft Corporation (n.d.). Praise in Viva Insights. Microsoft Support Knowledgebase. Accessed June 2, 2026, from <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/viva/insights/praise-in-viva-insights>

Microsoft Power Platform. (2025, August 29). Awards & recognition Copilot. Microsoft. <https://marketplace.microsoft.com/en-au/product/powerplatformtemplates.mpa-awardsandrecognitioncopilot>

Mushayi, Nicholas (2025, August 28). “Proven Strategies for Effective Employee Recognition: Examples and Best Practices.” Human Capital Hub. www.thehumancapitalhub.com/articles/proven-strategies-for-effective-employee-recognition-examples-and-best-practices

Rawlins, B. (2009). Give the emperor a mirror: Toward developing a stakeholder measurement of organizational transparency. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 21(1), 71–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10627260802153421>

Rawlins, B. L. (2008). Measuring the relationship between organizational transparency and employee trust. *Public Relations Journal*, 2(2), 1–21.

Rhoades, L., & Eisenberger, R. (2002). Perceived organizational support: A review of the literature. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87(4), 698–714. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.87.4.698>

Sadri, G., & Bowen, R. C. (2011). Meeting employee requirements. *Industrial Engineer*, 43(10), 44–48. <https://www2.lib.ku.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/meeting-employee-requirements/docview/1555639754/se-2>

Schnackenberg, A. K., & Tomlinson, E. C. (2016). Organizational transparency: A new perspective on managing trust in organization-stakeholder relationships. *Journal of Management*, 42(7), 1784–1810. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206314525202>

Society for Human Resource Management. (2024, April 4). Managing employee recognition programs. <https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/toolkits/managing-employee-recognition-programs>

The President and Fellows of Harvard College (2022). University of Kansas Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey: Report Preview. Harvard Graduate School of Education, 4-4.

University of California (2018, December 10). PPSM-34: Incentive and Recognition Award Plans. University of California, Systemwide Human Resources. <https://policy.ucop.edu/doc/4010430/PPSM-34>

University of Kansas – Analytics, Institutional Research, & Effectiveness (n.d.). Great Colleges to Work For (GCTWF) 2026. University of Kansas. Accessed May 28, 2026, from <https://aire.ku.edu/GCTWF-2026>

University of Kansas – Office of the Provost (2026, May 18). Campus Insider May 18, 2026. University of Kansas. <https://t.e2ma.net/webview/js3v5y/e1a66c4108117c9509980f9bad10be02>

University of Rochester (n.d.). UR Career Pathways Program. Office of Human Resources, University of Rochester. Accessed May 28, 2026, from <https://www.rochester.edu/human-resources/professional-success/ur-career-pathways-program>

Using Copilot as a writing assistant for employee recognition. (n.d.). The University of Texas at Arlington. Retrieved June 4, 2026, from <https://www.uta.edu/hr/employee-engagement/employee-recognition>

Wahl, I., Hagelstein, J., Stranzl, J., Einwiller, S., & Ruppel, C. (2025). Communicating appreciation in the workplace: Importance and perception of appreciation from managers and co-workers and its effects on organisational citizenship behaviour. *Journal of Communication Management*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-10-2024-0214>

Wahl, Ingrid, et al. (2025, November 13). “Employee Appreciation: A Systematic Review and Research Recommendations.” *Annals of the International Communication Association*.

White, P. (2018). Do remote employees prefer different types of appreciation than employees in face-to-face settings? *Strategic HR Review*, 17(3), 137–142. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SHR-03-2018-0018>

Wipro increases the impact of rewards and recognition platform with Microsoft 365 Copilot. (2026, April 20). Microsoft. Retrieved June 4, 2026, from <https://www.microsoft.com/en/customers/story/26393-wipro-microsoft-365-copilot>

Yencer, Kristen (2023). *Strategies for Informal Employee Recognition: Incorporating Employee Voices*. ProQuest LLC, ProQuest LLC. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2829357157?pq-orig-site=gscholar&fromopenview=true&sourcetype=Dissertations%20%20Theses>

APPENDIX A:

THANKU TIERED INITIATIVES

TIERED INITIATIVES FOR STAFF RECOGNITION AND APPRECIATION

Tier 1 – High Cost (Significant Funding, Infrastructure, or Benefits)

- University-wide Chancellor's Awards / Employee & Team of the Year program
- Extra discretionary leave (full or half days) as a reward
- Free or subsidized parking programs as recognition/benefit
- Expanded professional development funding pools tied to recognition or performance
- Basketball / Football tickets or high value experiential rewards (lottery-based)
- Structured, large-scale recognition events/ceremonies (enhanced years of service event, campus-wide celebrations)
- Major service milestone gifts (20+ years) upgrades
- Creation of a dedicated HR role or team for recognition programming
- Institution-wide culture initiatives tied to compensation, advancement, and career pathways

Tier 2 – Medium Cost (Moderate budget, programming, or system enhancements)

- Recognition Committee + budget to manage programs and events (expansion of current employee recognition committee and part of OneKU initiative)
- Expanded Employee of the Month / Team awards (more frequent, more inclusive categories)
- Team recognition programs (more frequent and consistent awards for collaboration)
- KU-branded swag or milestone gifts (e.g., shirts, polos, onboarding/year-one awards)
- Recognition ambassadors' network across units and campuses (similar to wellness ambassadors)
- Improved Years of Service program (digital/print booklets, formal recognition structure, opt-in for sharing information/recognition campus wide, building upon OneKU initiatives to include all campuses)
- Supervisor training programs focused on recognition & appreciation (either built into STEP program or stand-alone training; inclusive of all staff and faculty supervisors)

- Professional development tied to recognition criteria (e.g., integrating into funding rubrics)
- Technology enhancements
 - Built-in praise tools (Teams, HR systems, MyTalent updates)
 - Automated reminders to send recognition
- Formalized peer recognition programs (KU Kudos expansion)
- Public storytelling and communications strategy highlighting staff achievements across campus
- Cross-campus recognition events or hybrid engagement experiences for remote staff

Tier 3 – Low Cost (Minimal financial investment, high cultural impact)

- Recognition toolkit for supervisors (guides, templates, examples, best practices)
- Training resources / lunch & learns on appreciation practices
- Personalized recognition approaches (ask employees how they prefer to be recognized)
- E-cards, thank-you notes, and printable recognition materials (KU branded documents could be created for internal use and to share broadly on social media as applicable)
- Handwritten notes and direct verbal appreciation
- Peer-to-peer recognition practices (meeting shout-outs, sharing feedback emails)
- Team-level appreciation activities
 - Team lunches, coffee time, or treat days
 - Team-building outings (low-cost/local)
- Regular supervisor check-ins and acknowledgment practices
- Recognition prompts and AI drafted message templates
- Recognition for everyday contributions (not just “above and beyond”)
- Celebrating milestones (hire dates, birthdays, anniversaries)
- Visibility practices
 - Sharing staff accomplishments internally and forwarding positive feedback
 - Highlighting “behind-the-scenes” work
- Remote-inclusive recognition practices (virtual shout-outs, inclusive formats)
- Ongoing employee feedback loops (surveys, focus groups)
- Supervisor accountability for recognition as a leadership competency
- Collaboration with various offices for further opportunities, connections, and implementation related to staff needs and support (HR, Office of Civil Rights & Title IX, Jayhawks Elevate, Center for Teaching Excellence, etc.)

Key Insight Across All Tiers

The strongest theme is that recognition must be both structural (Tier 1–2) and relational (Tier 3) to be effective.

Employees value visibility, professional growth, and being “seen” consistently as much as formal awards.

APPENDIX B:

“BUILDING THE NEST” IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP

EMPLOYEE APPRECIATION & RECOGNITION PROGRAM – BUILDING THE NEST

PHASED IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP

Phase 1: Foundation (0–6 Months) – “Build the Culture / Gathering the Materials”

Goal: Establish consistency, visibility, and supervisor capability with low-cost, high-impact actions.

Key Initiatives

- Launch ThanKU Recognition Toolkit
 - Templates (thank-you notes, e-cards, emails, etc.)
 - Guidance on meaningful and inclusive recognition
 - Examples of team-level practices
- Supervisor Training Rollout
 - Recognition as a leadership competency in MyTalent
 - Personalization of appreciation through KU tools / toolkit
 - Remote/hybrid inclusion practices
- Standardize Everyday Recognition Practices
 - Encourage:
 - Meeting shout-outs
 - Sharing positive feedback
 - Milestone recognition (hire dates, birthdays)
- Introduce Simple Recognition Tools
 - E-cards + printable notes
 - Outlook/Teams praise tools
 - Recognition prompts/writing guides
- Employee Preference Capture
 - Short survey: how each employee prefers to be recognized

- Communication & Visibility Boost
 - Highlight staff contributions in newsletters or internal channels
 - Encourage peer-to-peer recognition sharing
- Establish Feedback Loop
 - Ongoing surveys / focus groups to measure impact and refine approach. Human Resources and Employee Recognition Committee utilizing results for implementation.

Outcomes

- Immediate morale improvement
- Better supervisor practices
- Increased consistency across units
- Employees feel “seen” more often

Phase 2: Structure & Expansion (6–18 Months) – “Build the System / Building the Nest”

Goal: Create sustainable infrastructure and broaden access to recognition across the institution.

Key Initiatives

- Form Recognition Committee + Budget
 - Reviewing and Building Committee Structure, as overseen by Human Resources
 - Program governance
 - Event planning
 - Ongoing improvement
- Expand Award Programs
 - Enhanced Employee of the Month (broader criteria)
 - Team-based awards for collaboration
 - More frequent recognition opportunities
- Launch Recognition Ambassador Network
 - Representatives across units
 - Promote programs and share local practices
- Pilot Recognition Technology Enhancements
 - Automated reminders
 - Integrated “praise” tools
 - Early-stage recognition portal functionality
- Improve Years of Service Program
 - Stronger ceremonies (digital/print storytelling)
 - Better milestone gifts
- Introduce Mid-Tier Rewards
 - KU-branded swag
 - Small milestone gifts
 - Structured team recognition incentives



- Strengthen Professional Development as Recognition
 - Tie recognition to development funding opportunities
 - Improve communication and access
- Expand Public Recognition & Storytelling
 - Campus-wide visibility of staff contributions
 - Cross-unit recognition efforts

Outcomes

- Reduced inconsistency across departments
- Increased participation in recognition programs
- Stronger sense of community across campus
- Recognition becomes visible and institutional

Phase 3: Institutionalization (18–36 Months) – “Embed & Elevate / Building on the KU Legacy”

Goal: Fully integrate recognition into KU's culture, systems, and employee value proposition.

Key Initiatives

- Launch Full Recognition Hub / Portal
 - Central platform for:
 - Peer recognition
 - Award nominations
 - Visibility across campus
 - Connects all recognition activities
- Establish Signature Institutional Awards
 - Chancellor's Awards
 - Employee & Team of the Year
 - High-visibility annual ceremonies
- Introduce High-Value Rewards
 - Discretionary leave days
 - Event experiences (tickets, special access)
 - Parking incentives/subsidies
- Create Dedicated Recognition Program Role (HR)
 - Manage strategy, programs, and analytics
- Integrate Recognition into Talent Systems
 - Performance management (MyTalent)
 - Promotion and development pathways
 - Supervisor evaluations include recognition practices
- Scale Structured Professional Growth Recognition
 - Funded career development pathways
 - Skill/tenure recognition tied to advancement

- Address Structural Recognition (Long-Term)
 - Align recognition with:
 - Career progression
 - Compensation frameworks
 - Workload and resource support

Outcomes

- Recognition becomes part of institutional identity
- Alignment with mission-critical initiatives
- Improved retention and engagement
- Strong alignment between recognition, growth, and rewards
- Sustainable, system-wide culture of appreciation

Optional Phase 4: Optimization & Continuous Improvement (36+ Months)

Goal: Refine, measure, and evolve the program.

Key Actions

- Data-driven evaluation (engagement, retention, participation)
- Continuous employee input loops
- Program adjustments based on usage and equity gaps
- Ongoing innovation (new recognition formats, technology upgrades)

Summary of Strategy

- **Phase 1:** Culture first (low cost, quick impact)
- **Phase 2:** Build structure and consistency
- **Phase 3:** Institutionalize with systems and investment
- **Long-term:** Align recognition with career growth and workplace realities

APPENDIX C:

THANKU RECOGNITION TOOLKIT

INITIAL IDEAS AND EXAMPLES

Supervisor Recognition Toolkit

Intentional Conversations/Assessment in supervisor/supervisee meetings around motivation, career aspirations, work environment, professional development, access to necessary resources, and overall work relationships to assess.

- Sample Questions in Supervisor/Supervisee conversations:
 - What aspects do you look forward to in your workday? What is frustrating?
 - What skills and talents would you like to use more often? What do you want to build on?
 - What professional opportunities are you interested in or want to know more about?
 - What knowledge and/or skills do you need to progress further in your career?
 - What can I do as your supervisor to help you achieve these goals?
 - Do you have the tools or resources you need to do your work well? What is either missing or are there any gaps in knowledge?
 - How do you navigate your personal and professional wellbeing? Are there resources or support you need from your supervisor / KU related to your wellbeing?
 - What do you find helpful that your supervisor does, and what is something helpful from your team/office/department/unit?
 - How do you build trust with others in the team/office/department/unit?
1. Support flexible / hybrid working schedules and needs. Provide supervisees with resources to ensure accommodations can be asked for and created as appropriate.
 2. Utilize handwritten or digital thank you notes and cards – invite others to sign the cards and share their own notes to recognize an individual.
 3. Keep track of employee professional development and upcoming opportunities to encourage supervisee(s) to attend.
 4. Nominate supervisees/teams for employee recognition awards (for the month or for the year).
 5. Keep track of times when a supervisee went above and beyond (date, actions, outcomes, etc.) Utilize these examples in employment evaluations, promotion considerations, etc.

6. Encourage taking vacation days if supervisees do not often utilize time away.
7. Share personal and professional achievements in the end of year reports for the office.

Department/Unit Toolkit

1. Provide in person and virtual resources folders for employees (personal support, mandatory reporting, etc.)
2. Encourage employees to identify gaps in progress and efficiency in office and at KU. Help them fill out the Jayhawks Elevate form as appropriate.
3. Community Building – Provide opportunities for a team meeting or virtual communications to share favorite media, recipes, traditions, pets, etc. Fostering connections improves team dynamics and builds trusting relationships.
4. Kudos / Snaps section in staff meeting agendas – Provide agenda access early to the team and allow for folks to fill in a sentence about what another staff member helped them with or something great that the other staff member had done in between staff meetings or for upcoming initiatives.
5. Use a small item that can be displayed for a short period at an employee’s desk (stuffed animal, trophy, etc.) to recognize that employee for the time period
6. Allow folks to share special events on the office calendar for others to see and attend. As folks have things like gallery shows, recitals, birthdays, and other celebrations, adding this to an office calendar can help folks feel seen and celebrated for their work and non-work achievements.
7. Keep track of and share out about employee recognition days (admin associate day, boss day, Employee Appreciation Day, graduate student appreciation day, etc.) Find ways to celebrate teams on these days
8. Folks always enjoy treats, both food and other trinkets. Having things like a bowl of candy, fidgets, and comfortable spaces to gather helps to build relationships and appreciation.
9. As individuals attend professional development opportunities (conferences, webinars, etc.) ask them to present or provide a summary of what they learned and what could be implemented in office.

Peer to Peer Toolkit

1. Ask what capacity folks are at, and if possible, are there tasks that can be delegated outward to alleviate any concerns or tensions between peers.
2. When someone spent long hours at work or navigated a large project or task, send a letter of thanks/appreciation to them (handwritten or virtually).
3. Recognize peers for their efforts during emerging situations, in meetings, for problem solving skills, collaboration, and other behind the scenes moments.
4. Share appreciation through Viva Insights on Teams.
5. Take interest in the work of peers, take space to think how positions interact and where can improvements be made.

APPENDIX D:

PROJECT SHOUTOU

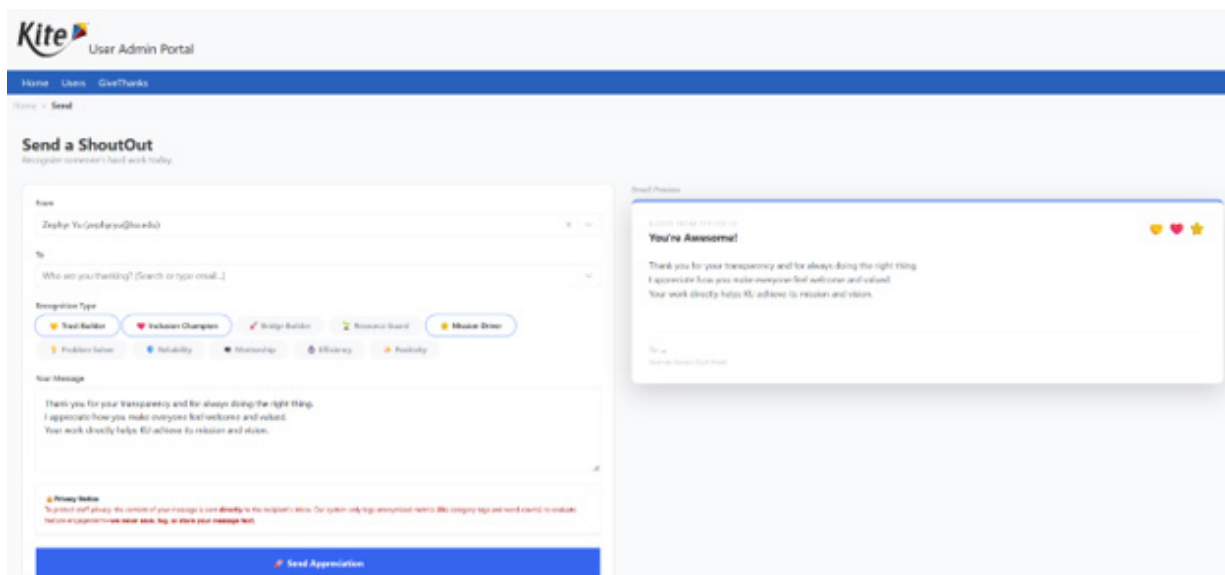
PROOF OF CONCEPT (PoC) & DATA ANALYSIS

UI Design Philosophy: Minimizing Friction to Build Culture

To successfully institutionalize a sustainable culture of appreciation at the University of Kansas, a platform must prioritize user experience (UX) by reducing cognitive load and time commitments. Traditional workplace recognition frameworks often fail due to the “blank canvas” dilemma, where employees struggle to articulate praise, leading to low participation rates.

Project ShoutOut explicitly combats this barrier through a **One-Click Default Phrasing** architecture. When a user selects one of the 10 custom, IRISE-aligned badges, the platform dynamically generates a high-quality, professional message tailored to that specific value pillar. (See Fig. D1.) Internal pilot data confirmed that a significant majority of participants utilized these default templates with minimal customization. This behavioral shortcut dramatically lowered user effort, allowing meaningful peer-to-peer recognition to occur in under 30 seconds, thereby maximizing platform adoption and enabling rapid cultural formation.

Figure D1



Project ShoutOut PoC User Interface

Note. A screenshot of the user interface of the Project ShoutOut POC.

Leadership Dashboard: Quantifying the Living Values

Beyond frontline engagement, Project ShoutOut serves as an institutional diagnostic tool for senior administration. While individual message content remains fully isolated and private to ensure an environment of high psychological safety, the system captures anonymized metadata, specifically tracking employee badge selection frequencies.

By aggregating these metrics, leadership can systematically “weigh” the real-time cultural health of a department. During the department pilot, the data revealed that **Teamwork, Reliability, and Problem Solver** emerged as the highest-volume categories. This breakdown provides leadership with empirical verification that staff are actively prioritizing operational support, lateral collaboration, and collaborative crisis resolution in their daily workflows.

Data Analysis: The Critical Role of Automated Reminders

To evaluate the sustainability of the platform and understand employee habit formation, a multi-week behavioral experiment was executed. The tracking database monitored metrics across five distinct chronological phases, measuring the direct impact of active administrative reminders versus a “silent” baseline period.

The complete empirical results of the pilot experiment are detailed in the data framework below:

Key Experimental Takeaways

1. **Software Alone Does Not Alter Culture:** The complete cessation of text transmissions during the “Silent Experiment” (May 22–31) mathematically indicates that introducing a platform is insufficient on its own to break administrative routines.
2. **Nudges Drive Instant Action:** The explosive single-day response on June 1 (49 transactions immediately following the morning nudge) proves that automated notifications effectively convert passive intent into active organizational gratitude. (See Fig. D2.)
3. **Compounding Adoption Curve:** The total transactional volume generated in the second active phase (64 total emails across June 1–4) far exceeded the first active phase (18 emails), demonstrating an accelerating user familiarity and compounding cultural momentum.

Project ShoutOut: Engagement Tracking

The Direct Impact of Behavioral Nudges on Employee Recognition Volume

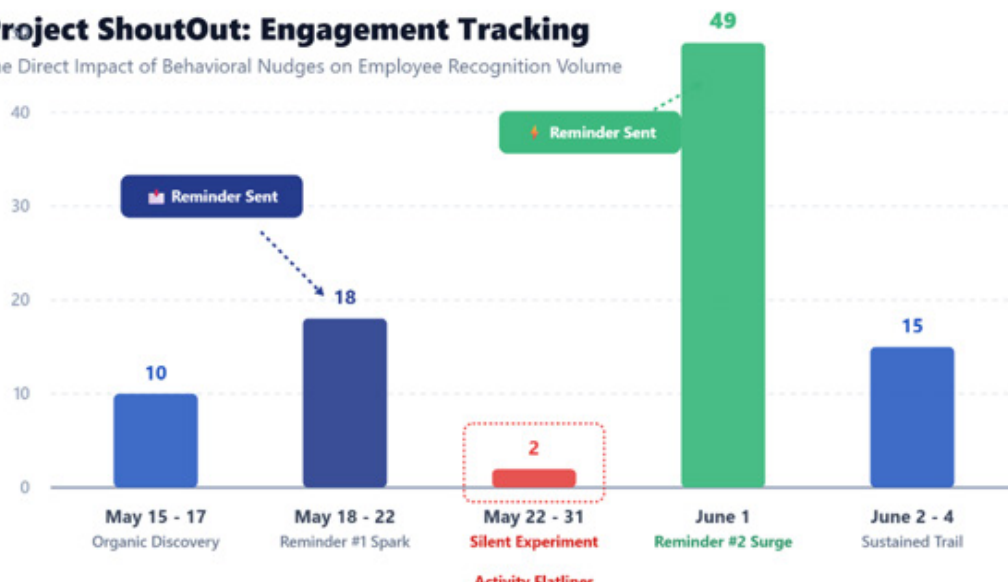


Figure D1

*Project ShoutOut
PoC Action
Following
Reminders*

Note. A bar graph showing the number of transactions completed after a behavioral nudge.



KU

THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

The University of Kansas prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, ethnicity, religion, sex, national origin, age, ancestry, disability, status as a veteran, sexual orientation, marital status, parental status, gender identity, gender expression, and genetic information in the university's programs and activities. Retaliation is also prohibited by university policy. The following person has been designated to handle inquiries regarding the nondiscrimination policies and procedures and is the Title IX Coordinator for all KU and KUMC campuses: Associate Vice Chancellor for the Office of Civil Rights and Title IX, civilrights@ku.edu, Room 1082, Dole Human Development Center, 1000 Sunnyside Avenue, Lawrence, KS 66045, 785-864-6414, 711 TTY. Reports can be submitted to the Title IX Coordinator by visiting the following website: civilrights.ku.edu/how-report