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### Why One-Size-Fits-All Recognition is a Thing of the Past By: Janet North

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Corporate America has been abuzz over the last few years about the impending retirement of the Baby Boomers and the ramifications associated with this predicted mass exodus. More recently, however, there is an emerging groundswell suggesting that it may not happen so fast-instead, Boomers may be more inclined to reinvent themselves in a second career or keep one toe in the working world while they instead pursue semi-retirement.

Regardless of who's right and who's wrong, the workplace is becoming increasingly diverse. While gender gaps slowly close, ethnic and generational diversity is on the rise with a record four generations coexisting in most workplaces. These changing dynamics have organizational and Human Resource leadership examining and adjusting their employee recognition, training, development and human capital practices in order to attract, engage and retain skilled, high-potential employees now and into the future.

While I am not an expert on generational diversity, I am an avid reader and student of this phenomenon. As a practice leader in the fields of employee recognition and engagement for MotivAction, my charter is to marry generational research with recognition best practices, thereby developing new rules around employee recognition. An overarching premise in this new set of rules is that "one size doesn't fit all."

The four recognition practices my company has created and adopted combine tried and true recognition principles, mounting employee diversity challenges and emerging reporting and compliance regulations. These best practices include **Consistency, Control, Communication** and **Choice**.

This article elaborates on "Choice" as a critical recognition practice. Gone are the days when managers kept a drawer full of gift certificates to use at their discretion when recognizing employees. Aside from the fact that there are little or no Controls in place with what I consider to be an ultra-discretionary recognition practice (not to mention the fact that Sarbanes and Oxley would undoubtedly be disappointed), employees want the right to **choose** how they will be recognized and rewarded-not forced to accept what their manager thinks will motivate them.

Motivation and recognition principles are shifting. What the recognition industry terms **"trophy value" is being redefined at an individual level**. Trophy value has evolved to include both popular lifestyle items like electronics, sporting goods and jewelry and newer forms of recognition such as training and development, media and music, time off and charitable contributions donated in the recognized employee's name.

Because an organization's management team ultimately creates the policies and recognition practices for the entire organization, it is critical that corporate leaders look beyond themselves and their personal values to design meaningful incentive and recognition programs. Seeking to first understand what your workforce finds motivating then moving beyond one-size-fits-all by offering a full suite of recognition alternatives may be a key differentiator once the competition for skilled, high-potential employees really gets fierce.

At the risk of sounding contradictory, I'll close by pointing out that there are, in fact, one-size-fits-all recognition practices that are not only acceptable, but desirable. Maslow's theory still holds water because every person has ego and esteem needs to nurture. There is tremendous trophy value in having our contributions made known publicly-whether it's in a small group department meeting or part of a more formal companywide recognition ceremony. In addition, because people are people, a heartfelt "thank you" transcends gender and generation. Stopping by an employee's desk and thanking him or her for specific contributions doesn't cost a thing-and buys you a lot as an employer.

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As the workplace continues to evolve and becomes increasingly diverse, employers that adjust their methods of recognition will benefit in the end.

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#### **About the author**

Janet North is a practice leader in the fields of employee recognition and performance improvement with MotivAction, a Minneapolis-based organization with offices in Boston, Chicago and Phoenix. MotivAction is on the leading edge when it comes to employee recognition, thought leadership and execution and is uniquely suited to effectively address generational diversity and award choice in the workplace with SuperStoreSM, their proprietary online awards and recognition suite featuring over 3 million items that mirror the latest retail trends. MotivAction is the most decorated agency internationally by the Society of Incentive & Travel Executives (SITE) for creative, results-based incentive and recognition programs. Core products include *Recognition Platforms & Awards*, *Learning Solutions* and *Travel & Event Services*. [jnorth@motivaction.com](mailto:jnorth@motivaction.com); [www.motivaction.com](http://www.motivaction.com).

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