



## Transforming the Employee Experience with Recognition: Centra Health



How does a busy healthcare organization transform their employee experience to match their world-class patient experience?

In just over a year, Centra Health used employee recognition to create meaningful experiences for their people.

“We were moving from job satisfaction to employee experience. How do we tap into getting higher discretionary effort from our frontline team members?” explains Karen Ackerman,

Vice President of Human Resources at Centra Health. “How do we show them examples of what it looks like to live out our values? We don’t just want to say thank you after 5 years or when you are leaving the organization, we want you to know every day counts.”

By getting out in front of the people doing great work, Centra Health focused on building relationships and made employee recognition a regular part of the employee experience. They looked for a recognition

solution that was meaningful to their people—something that provided consistency, flexibility, and choice in the user experience.

“We were looking for a vehicle that would standardize recognition and the way leadership looks for great work and calls it out. We wanted to find tools to celebrate all the wonderful ways employees contribute to our team,” says Amy Martin, Director of Total Rewards.

## Bringing Recognition to the Hands and Feet of Their Workforce

At first senior leaders didn't view recognition as a priority. They didn't know what was on the hearts and minds of over 8,000 teammates that served over 9,000 square miles in hospitals, schools, a health plan, and a college of nursing. But they knew they wanted to involve their people in making a decision. So, Ackerman's team started with an internal survey of employees to understand how and why they would want to be recognized. Then they took the results back to senior leaders and showed them the need for ongoing recognition and appreciation.

“We wanted people to recognize, feel empowered and encouraged to recognize, and make that connection of how people make a difference at work. We're in healthcare, where people love taking care of people. And when people feel valued, they are going to do incredible things,” says Ackerman.

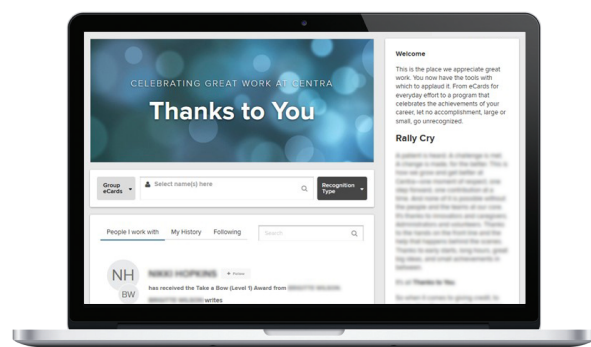
Ackerman and team knew who to turn to for a brand-new recognition solution. After providing service awards to Centra Health for over 20 years, O.C. Tanner was a natural choice. “O.C. Tanner was always very consistent and had a good reputation of being reliable,”

explains Aubrey Varraux, Total Rewards Program Manager. The core implementation team in charge of searching for a provider was impressed by O.C. Tanner's technology, flexibility, and the usefulness of their tools.

To launch their new “Thanks to You” recognition program, Ackerman and Centra Health's CEO introduced the program at one of Centra Health's monthly leadership meetings, utilized communication campaigns provided by O.C. Tanner, and held keynote presentations for leaders and online training for employees to learn the how and why of recognition.

Centra Health also established automatic processes to reintroduce the Thanks to You program to employees at various intervals in the employee experience: during new hire orientation, leadership development trainings, and major healthcare events like healthcare week, nurse's week, radiology week, etc. “While pizza and tote bags are nice every once in a while, being able to use the Thanks to You platform can celebrate our people and give them a choice in what they want to receive,” notes Ackerman. “It's important for people to feel seen in that way.”

Varraux's team does roadshows across the system to show how employee recognition is part of their total rewards at Centra Health and not just another program or website. The mobile app is helpful in reaching their busy, offline population



and constant reminders— emails, screen savers on shared kiosks, huddle boards in every unit, leader training, new leader packets— have contributed to a steady 70%+ engagement in the program itself.

“Working with O.C. Tanner really ensured this program fit our organization,” says Ackerman. “It’s not something we searched for online and just came up with. It’s worth this investment in our people.”

## Leveraging Champions

In 2019, Centra Health launched their new Recognition Champion Program. Champions are strategically placed across the organization to help bring awareness and encourage teammates to use the Thanks to You program. Champions go through a certification process and use quarterly conference calls and activities to stay connected, share articles about recognition, and swap stories and best practices. “It’s cool to see people outside HR sharing and loving recognition,” says Varraux.

Champions also encourage employees and leaders to give recognition across departments, which was not part of the Centra Health culture prior to the Thanks to You program. Beth Ackerman, recognition champion and Director of Rivermont Schools, which provides education for children with autism and emotional disabilities, recalls her division being siloed in their work. “The Thanks to You program has helped people cross over, feel less competition, and be a cross-functional team.” She models the recognition with the school principals, which encourages them to recognize their own staff.

Tim Schoonmaker, Director of Nutrition Services for Acute Care Hospitals, agrees. With his 175 team members spread across 150 miles, Tim also uses the Thanks to You program

to recognize people that aren’t on his team but help them do great work. He encourages people to give cross-functional recognition as it helps his team “see how their work extends beyond the 4 walls of the kitchen.”

**Employees love the choice of awards the Thanks to You program provides. Tim Schoonmaker is on the board of the local Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Central Virginia, and once used his points to provide his mentee, a 14-year-old boy, with a laptop for school work since he didn’t have one. “We are here for the community, and our mission is Excellent Care for Life. Our mission and culture is to take care of people, and it’s important that people are involved in various things in our community. This recognition program can help with that.”**

## Results

After only 2 years, the Thanks to You program has been wildly successful:

- Over 72% of employees are using the system and 89% received recognition from the program during the first year.
- On their first annual employee survey after launch, employees proactively mentioned being appreciated as a peak moment in their experience. Statements like “recognition is contagious”, “recognition empowers people”, and “recognition makes it easy to come to work” littered the survey.
- Even more exciting, an analysis of recognition usage and employee attrition data shows that both informal recognition through eCards and formal recognition through nomination points had an impact on employee turnover.

Both monetary and non-monetary eCards decreased employee attrition:

### Non-Monetary eCards Received

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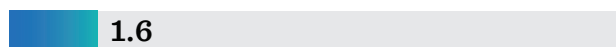


RETAINED EMPLOYEES

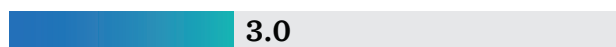


### Monetary eCards Received

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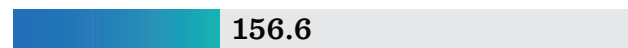
RETAINED EMPLOYEES



And employees who stayed received, on average, more recognition in the form of nomination points:

### Nomination Points

ATTRITED EMPLOYEES



RETAINED EMPLOYEES



In fact, a 1 unit increase in nominations received equaled a 19% decrease in the odds of attrition, and a 1 unit increase in eCards received equaled a 27% decrease in odds of attrition.

“It’s very telling that the biggest impact is from receiving eCards. People aren’t just in it for the 250 points, or to get the most expensive thing in the program. It means they value the act of recognition and it’s meaningful to them. Even a simple eCard,” says Varraux.

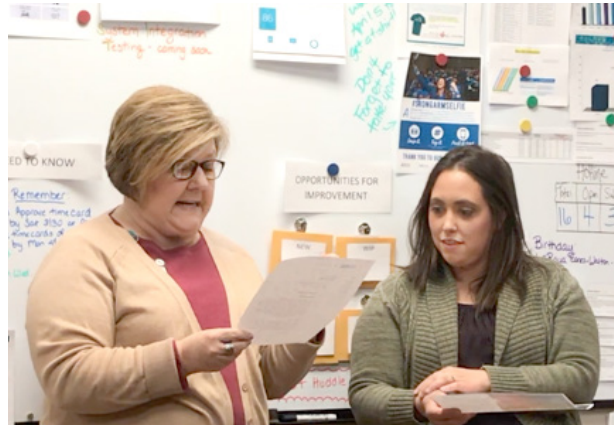
The biggest success for the Centra team is watching people learn how to use the program. Varraux tells the story of a Recognition Champion who recognized a team member for great care she provided. After sending the employee an eCard, the recipient came over and said “I didn’t know you could send eCards for stuff like that. I need to go back to my desk and send some eCards for my teammates.”

## A Cultural Transformation

Recognition is now part of Centra Health's employee engagement and employee experience strategies. Leaders know the Thanks to You program is a tool available and part of the larger strategy to improve engagement and create peak experiences. It's helped create a tighter connection between managers and employees, and helps employees understand how their work impacts the organization.

Martin says, "This program helps capture what people are already doing. It helps us align to our true north goals and engage our team members." Moving forward, Martin and Varraux are working to align the Thanks to You program with their wellness initiatives, focusing on overall employee wellbeing by helping employees be their best selves.

Recognition is now a part of Centra Health's culture. It's what makes Centra a different, amazing place to work, and part of an employee's total rewards package. As Karen Ackermann puts it, "recognition is on purpose and by design. We now recognize the hands and feet of people doing important work. We are able to say this is part of who we are. We can't promote our mission—Excellent Care for Life—if we don't do that for our people. The Thanks to You program celebrates employees as individuals and honors their skills and talents. We want people to use it, do it, know why they are doing it, and watch the mileage come from it."



**“There is now the expectation that we appreciate great work. Appreciation has become a part of who we are. People use that word and talk about it. It’s part of the heartbeat of our organization, and it provides all of us hope when we see the good things people are doing across the organization.”**

**- KAREN ACKERMANN, VICE PRESIDENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES, CENTRA HEALTH**

