

Challenges in the Implementation of Peer-to-peer Recognition

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Abstract. This paper aims to explore potential issues in implementing peer-to-peer recognition to motivate employees. A qualitative inquiry is applied to enhance our understanding of peer-to-peer recognition schemes in practical situations. Sixteen participants, including HR researchers and managers from different organizations where this program has been implemented, attended semi-structured interviews. From which twelve cases are chosen for this study. Using thematic analysis on the collected responses, the researcher finds that challenges to peer-to-peer recognition are to be found in four categories: the impact of personal relationship, the unsuitability of working climate, the confusing nomination criteria, and the lack of an appropriate rewarding policy. Practical solutions to deal with those challenges are also proposed, which include building the culture and assigning monitor, to assist employers to effectively make use of a peer-to-peer program in motivating employees. This study therefore raises the awareness of optimizing motivation program for HR practitioners, as well as contributes a qualitative approach toward the non-cash recognition evaluation.

1 Introduction

Peer-to-peer recognition in the workplace is defined as a HR management program that allows employees to be recognized by their peer and gives recognition to the co-workers (Hastings, 2009; Vranjes, 2014). It provides a bunch of benefits for both employees and employers. As for employees, peer-to-peer recognition firstly generates more chances for an employee to be recognized. Compliments from peers create as much motivation as those from managers (Maslow, 1954; Smith, 2014; Achor, 2016). Unlike manager's appraisal that normally takes place quarterly or at the end of project and is based on overall performance or given for mostly high-visible tasks, peer recognition happens in daily interaction and is based on small achievements and good behavior. Therefore, the latter is more equal and valuable and makes employees proud more of their efforts (White, 2017). By increasing the number of positive interactions among workers, the program also enhances trust, strengthens relationship and working spirit (Gostick and Elton, 2008; Vranjes, 2014; Byam, 2015).

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As for employers, peer-to-peer recognition, at first, creates a supportive working environment which leads to the increase of employee engagement and commitment (Nelson, 2004; Globoforce, 2015). Second, it helps reduce the mistakes in the work. The “Hawthorne effect” indicates that people work harder and more carefully under supervision (McCarney et al., 2007), even when the supervision comes from peers. At the same time, an employee would reflect to herself and attempt to make equivalent progress as she nominates her peers (Byam, 2015). Third, the results of peer-to-peer recognition efficiently assists managers in terms of performance appraisal, particularly for talent discovery and long-distance management (Vranjes, 2014; Steele, 2016).

Recently, HR researchers worldwide have noticed an increasing trend in the usage of peer-to-peer recognition since 2010 (GloboForce, 2015; TINYpulse, 2015). Worldatwork (2015) indicates that 48 percent of 489 surveyed organizations apply the recognition method of peer-to-peer, and the number is forecasted to increase. Among the surveyed sample, there are big names including Harvard Law School, Nestle, Zappos and Mindvalley. Despite the upward trend in using peer-to-peer recognition, this method, particularly its implementation process, still receives lack of attention from academic researchers (Smith, 2014; Gribben et al., 2018). Acknowledging the need, this study looks for organizations where peer-to-peer recognition are put on action, either who have gained or failed from it, to collect intelligence and answer the question: What are the difficulties when implementing peer-to-peer recognition and how to resolve?

From the interview results, a qualitative inquiry is applied to enhance our understanding about peer-to-peer recognition schemes in practical situation. This study demonstrates a way to use semi-structured interview and thematic analysis to explain in depth a current recognition method of peer-to-peer, exploring its characteristics and implications.

The research determined four challenges during the implementation of peer-to-peer recognition and four related solutions within the experiences of the respondents. The first concern is about how to achieve a bias-free environment for recognition, as recognition results are seriously influenced by employee personal relationship at work. The riddle could be solved if managers facilitate a culture of complimenting before starting the program. The ambience, or climate, within the organization itself is the second most mentioned issue by respondents. For example, a high-competitive working environment can diminish the overall efficiency as peers are reluctant to recognize others. The suggestion is to elaborate a campaign that communicate clearly about the purpose and benefits of peer-to-peer recognition, which is of more intangible than tangible values. The third challenge is about setting the nomination criteria. Employees might find it unfair or misunderstand the criteria, while implementers struggling to make it right. Encouraging labor representatives to participate in discussing the rule before establishment is the best choice to reduce this risk. The last challenge is about maintaining the program in the long term, as employee engagement is likely to decrease harshly overtime. This is the consequence of not having proper rewards from the organization, as peer recognition alone is not enough to motivate.

2 Methodology

From March 20th, 2017, to June 20th, 2017, the researcher contacted 31 people from many different organizations and industries around the world, who have proof of experience about peer-to-peer recognition. Among those who were contacted, sixteen agreed to participate in the interview. These participants were found and contacted online using social networks, such as Linked, Quora, Facebook, Skype, and email, as Internet is the most popular way nowadays to connect research initial informants (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016:127).

Semi-structured interview is chosen as the core of this research design. This type of interview has flexible questions but still follows a guidance of topic boundary. It allows researchers, who already have moderate understanding about the topic through personal reflection and literature review, to maintain the control over the interview (Melia, 2000; Whiting, 2008; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016:111). With semi-structured style, the researcher can narrow the interview topic to a specific area, but still set an equal role with interviewees to adopt new thoughts and feelings.

The purposive sampling, also known as judgement sampling, is chosen for this study. Answering this research question requires only a limited number of participants who experience the peer-to-peer recognition, as a manager or an implementor, in their organizations (Tongco, 2007) studies qualitative researchers and concludes that purposive sampling is very effective for studying specific knowledge, case studies and practices comparison. In addition, this sampling method allows the researchers to base on the research questions to choose the best sample that can serve the research objectives (Saunders et al., 2015:301).

As for the sample size, Saunders et al. (2015:297) recommends having 5 to 25 interviews in a semi-structured interview. Unlike quantitative research, the quantity of responses in qualitative research is not as important as the quality contributed to the understanding of subject by those responses (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

The online interview session was operated in 3 phases: warm-up, discussing and closing. As for warm-up phase, Merriam and Tisdell (2016:125) and Whiting (2008) recommend starting an interview session with greeting, making informal and neutral conversation, asking descriptive question to build the rapport with the interviewee. In the discussing phase, the participants were asked about their experiences and opinions about peer-to-peer recognition program of their organization. As the interview is semi-structure, there was no predetermined script and the respondents were free to share, or extend their personal ideas (Saunders et al., 2015:393), but every session was consciously controlled to be a "systemic, structured and with-purpose conversation" (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015:5). During this phase, the researcher needs to keep in mind general instructions while asking questions in clear language, remaining the neutral and respect attitude toward interviewees' answers by not giving personal beliefs or values and not arguing with the interviewees (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016:128). Finally, the ending phase involves asking if the participants have any concerns, questions, or thoughts that they want to share, thanking them and finishing the session.

For the analysis of collected qualitative data in this research, the researcher uses inductive approach, together with thematic analysis. Inductive approach is for researchers who start with collecting data, then explore new theory from the reality observation (Collis and Hussey, 2014:7). From the collected answers of interviewees who have experience in peer-to-peer recognition, the researcher explores the issues in its implementation process and the solutions. This can be considered as a fair contribution of knowledge to the research topic of an inductive researcher

Thematic analysis is the core method to explore the data in this research. In thematic analysis, raw data is coded into themes, or patterns, or categories (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016:204) and interpreted as answer for the research question. The thematic analysis process includes four overlapping activities: data reduction, data display, conclusion, and verification (Collis and Hussey, 2014). In the first stage, the researcher gets familiar with the raw data by reading it all over again before coding it into themes. After being coded, themes are discussed, linked, and refined to develop propositions for testing.

3 Findings

3.1 Theme One: Peer-to-peer recognition is significantly biased towards personal relationships

This theme is not only mentioned the most by the interviewees but also widely discussed in business literature. It is a significant key finding of this research supporting the consensus. According to the result, the most common challenge of peer-to-peer recognition correlates with the personal relationship among co-workers. Sami, who launched this program in his company, said:

If you are my colleague and I like you, then I will submit a very positive evaluation for you, otherwise I will submit a negative one. Both options are not based on real subjective evaluation but on personal basis. Friends would help friends, even if not deserving. Other employees, who would want to be honest, could become outcasts. (Sami)

Having similar experiences, Son, Dinh Duc and Mai also agreed on this point. David provided a very good metaphor for this problem:

Sometimes it (peer-to-peer recognition) becomes the 'You'll scratch my back, then I'll scratch yours'. In workplace, not only good deeds are reciprocal, but also the exchange favors as a currency or bartering system. A good example of a failed peer-to-peer recognition system is LinkedIn's Endorsements (LinkedIn, 2017) where employees would endorse each other basing on a whim, and so it became meaningless. (David)

In another organization, employees used to take peer-to-peer recognition as a favor and tend to repay the giver:

In the beginning, it was somehow similar to a kind of repay. When I received a thank-you note from a particular colleague, I have an urge to give back another note to that very person... I would look for a proper occasion, but it is possibly biased. (Linh)

Personal bias could make peer-to-peer recognition meaningless, from a motivation program to become a flattery channel. It is still recognition but neither satisfies an Esteem need (Maslow, 1954), nor is a motivator factor (Herzberg, 1966) as the recipients value it just as much as a handshake. In one's defense, it might create reinforcing motivation (Skinner, 1953), but only among closed-relationship employees, or favored toward popular employees (Creelman, 2016). A recognition program only works well if it serves the true purpose of appreciating achievements and create fair opportunities for everybody (White, 2017).

For the solution, many interviewees admitted that personal bias is something inevitable, but not unchangeable. It is recommended that manager should be patient and use bottom-up approach to gradually eliminate the personal bias. To be success, a peer recognition program may take as long as building a new culture. Maarten suggested to start the program bottom-up:

Involve employees from the start. Support them in making it "their" program, within reasons, and enable it. This is change management and a bottom-up gives instant buy-in. Very good for engagement by itself. (Maarten)

Linh and Phuong also talked about bottom-up and the priority of developing the culture first:

I believe that the only answer for this challenge is to let it happen. It cost us time and mistakes every time we start doing something new. Try not to panic when people do not do it your way. The goal of this program is happiness for employee.

Let them do it their way, have some fun, for as long as it takes, so that recognition become a part of your organization culture. (Linh)

We are building a culture and environment of feedback and recognizing (...). We also develop the culture of how to use those feedbacks afterward. (Phuong)

Anh Duc suggested role-changing to make co-workers understand others' tasks, and from that to create a culture of sympathetic:

We switched the role of employees through projects: coders, testers, account managers, etc. In this way, employees not only learn more skills but also put themselves in others' shoes, to understand others' difficulties and advantages. It sets a good cultural base for peer-to-peer recognition. (Anh Duc)

According to Creelman (2016), peer recognition is not seriousness but culture and celebrating other's accomplishment with joy. Previous studies also stress the point of involving the employees to build the peer recognition culture (Vranjes, 2014; Burke, 2016). Building recognition giving culture can provide peer-to-peer recognition program with a supporting context (Nelson, 2016), with high awareness of different work responsibilities among employees and high program engagement. Strong recognition culture can play a role of a strong "reinforcer" (Skinner, 1953; Daniels, 1989) to motivate employees.

3.2 Theme Two: The current climate within the organization does not support this program

According to some respondents, peer-to-peer recognition may encounter difficulties in eastern organizational culture, large and hierarchal organizations, competitiveness, and working environment in which unskilled workers are the majority. Daphne, Phuong and Son, who share the Asian culture, agreed that organization with a hierarchical structure is a challenge:

The existing workplace culture (in Asia) which may not be supportive of such programs. Many Asian workplaces are leader led, hierarchical and not good at praising. People in these environments are more likely not to say anything or acknowledge good work as this is an example of 'just doing your job'. (Phuong)

From another aspect, Dinh Duc and Sami thought highly competitive working environment can make peer-to-peer recognition ineffective. It even raises the level of jealousy and internal conflict.

Since the BOD (board of directors) made teams to bid on projects, they have competed harshly even on little things. G1 (a team) just give recognitions among themselves. The team leader did nothing about that... (Dinh Duc)

In another example, Mai believed the work nature itself and workers' level of education can create challenges for applying peer-to-peer recognition:

It is easier to apply the peer-to-peer recognition for companies with high-skilled workers such as a law company, a university, or an educational organization, also for small and medium enterprises than big-mature ones. (Mai)

Daphne had a concern that work nature can become an issue of unfairness in a peer-to-peer recognition program:

Often it may be the same person all the time because their work nature and personal styles are framed that way, for example the boss secretary or customer service agents or the IT help desk people. Individual contributor roles, or cross functional roles are rarely nominated or recognized. (Daphne)

These opinions are correlated with the context criteria of a recognition program, which was also a concern of Luthans (2000), Nelson (2016), and Steele (2016). Some of the responses supported the argument of Gostick and Elton (2008), Vranjes (2014) and Mazzei (2016)

that peer-to-peer recognition works better for small team and high-visible job positions, and less effective in hierarchal organization.

For the solution, new implementors need to carefully prepare the communication campaign before launching. Dang believed a peer-to-peer recognition scheme should be marketed like a product, by which the benefits are highly communicated. Maarten, Andrew, Phuong and Mai all agreed with this opinion:

Your communications should be focused about why it is good to recognize your colleagues, how it positively affects you and makes for a great working environment, to build up excitement and increase early adoption rate. (Andrew)

Simon emphasized the importance of communication transparency:

Be as transparent as possible during all the roll and post roll-out... Communicate upfront about the how, why, and what of the recognition program to build up excitement & increase early adoption rate. (Simon)

A couple of respondents recommended having clear communication in term of the program rewards, which are more about intangible than tangible values:

This program work on the level of affiliation (or emotions) and relatedness. They are rewards for intrinsic motivations. You should never, ever, couple it to compensation, promotions, or other extrinsic motivators! The dynamics will change overnight and suddenly relations between people turn sour if money or a career are at stake. (Maarten)

Employees would not find out about the benefits of peer-to-peer recognition (Vranjes, 2014; Byam, 2015; White, 2017) themselves. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the organization to make it clear. When employees clearly understand the program benefits, they will engage contingently and frequently (Nelson, 2016). Furthermore, organizations should communicate their expectations of employees in the program, such as being honest, fair and carefully writing nomination (Steele, 2016).

3.3 Theme Three: Nomination criteria are confusing or not applicable to all groups/departments

One third of respondents agreed that creating recognition criteria can be a challenge. Basing on its own core values and goals, each organization will create a unique set of nomination criteria when it comes to peer-to-peer recognition. As a result, one cannot affirm her set of criteria as the best fit. In addition, for something as complicate and abstract as recognition (Smith, 2014), a set of guidelines or criteria can be perceived differently by different teams or departments. Daphne and Sami were worried that some criteria can become confusing and difficult to be measured:

Of course, each one has his own interpretation, but I think sometimes my company had the wrong values or behaviors recognized or appreciated. For example, should a person who works late be recognized? Is this a culture that we want in our office? (Daphne)

Linh and Dang reported the situation when criteria are too difficult to understand and can be interpreted inconsistently:

We used to have so many difficulties with the criteria, such as some criteria received little or zero recognition. (Dang)

From what I know, the HR department, the Customer Service department, and the Training department understand and proceed the evaluation method in totally different ways. (Linh)

Mai complained that her organization's peer recognition marking form cannot adapt to every project:

Criteria need to be modified to suit my working responsibility and experience.

Many times, I found it does not reasonable to mark my team performance. (Mai)

Because of inapplicable criteria, employees from different functions may have difficulties recognizing each other, such as when a salesperson reviews an accountant, or when a receptionist reviews a marketing executive (Steele, 2016). When a confusing recognition criterion is left out by employees, the expected behavior or action will not be encouraged to happen (Hansen *et al.*, 2002; White, 2017). It does not meet neither the frequency and context criteria of giving recognition (Nelson, 2016) nor the reinforcement theory (Skinner, 1953; Daniels, 1989).

Setting easy-to-understand recognition criteria can be a real challenge. However, the best choice is to make the criteria as short and simple as possible, by linking it with company and department missions and goals, or just having no criteria at all:

Identify criteria for recognition and tie them back to organization's goal and mission. You can seek for input from all layers of your organization. (Simon)

Why make it complicated? We let our employees to make the choices on their own whether to give a thank-you or not. We just remind them to write down the reasons clearly so that the receiver feels recognized and motivated. (Linh)

A couple of respondents suggested passing the ball to the employees themselves. Dang suggested embedding employees' opinions:

We interviewed to find out what our employees need about recognition and combine it in the program design. For example, we took the idea of attaching peer-to-peer recognition into KPI (Key Performance Indicator). By this way, it can cover all kinds of performance and behavior. (Dang)

From the literature, Creelman (2016) suggested that instruction should be given, and criteria should be gradually changed using best-practice approach. As for the issue of fairness among job positions and personalities, Steele (2016) agreed with creating forms and criteria that are applicable to all departments or job positions, also giving a blank textbox for adding comments. In the end, having a well-designed nomination rule and criteria would help meet contingency, frequency, formality, and context criteria of a good recognition program (Vranjes, 2014; Nelson, 2016).

3.4 Theme Four: Maintain employee engagement – The absence of appropriate rewards

Finally, yet importantly, without appropriate accompanied rewards, peer-to-peer recognition is likely to lose employee engagement and become a wasted program. Half of the respondents agreed on this point. Phuong and Dang complained about the limited numbers of tangible rewards that his company offered:

In my case, the reward as for receiving peer recognition is too little. It was granted quarterly by the company for the department with the most nominations. I do not mean greedy, but more budget for rewarding will certainly boost the engagement (for the program). (Dang)

Daphne had her experience when an inappropriate reward not only fails to motivate the employee but also becomes a cynicism:

It did not go as well when a marketing executive felt that the secret gift, an 89\$ spa voucher, was not commensurate with her effort. She had put in many late hours to secure the client's renewal of contract and in Australia, which is not an Australian common working manner. After winning the prize, she quitted because basically, she felt insulted rather than inspired to do more. (Daphne)

Linh admitted that the peer-to-peer recognition in her department has happened not as effective as another department, due to offering no tangible reward:

One thing that HR department did better than us (Training department) is that they have monthly reward, while we did not. I noticed the engagement has drop since the fourth month. What a shame!... I had to sit down to create a policy for the reward and how lucky, the CEO approved it straight away. (Linh)

Maarten warned that the absence of rewards or an equal distribution of rewards will completely knock-out the peer recognition goodwill:

Most important, reward of behavior must be perceived as genuine and authentic for these programs to work. It's proof that people "see" and care about efforts. Any tendency of "the next round should go to X because X hasn't gotten it yet" undermines the whole initiatives. (Maarten)

Inappropriate reward is a concern that was mentioned in previous studies. Irvine (2012) calls it "an unfortunate trend" as there was an increasing number of organizations equip their peer-to-peer recognition program with zero-value reward. To be effective, recognitions should be valued by the recipient (Smith, 2014; Nelson, 2016). Inferably, tangible, or cash reward from the company, will enhance the effectiveness of peer-to-peer recognition. Without real rewards, a peer-to-peer recognition program has a very high chance to be looked down by employees and would collapse in the short-term (Steele, 2016).

This last theme is linked closely with the literature. Data from both primary and literature emphasized that rewards, accompanied by recognition, must be practical, genuine to the individual, specific to the behavior. Simon talked about real-word rewards and specific compliment:

Organizations should leverage peer-to-peer recognition by rewarding acclaimed workers within departments and teams with real-word rewards. Rewards should be tied closely to the effort to make the employee aware of the behavior or attitude he should replicate. Plus, the more specific and detailed your recognition is, the sincerer and more honest the recipient will feel it. (Simon)

The rewards are recommended to be specified not only for the behavior but also for individuals' needs. Sami, Son, Mai and Dang all agreed on the point that small rewards, both tangible and intangibles are essential add-ons, and they should be grant more frequently.

Rewards should be available for short-term recognition, granted more than quarterly and annually, and for individual apart from for the departments and teams. (Dang)

Non-cash reworks can be special treatments, like a priority parking lot, the right to access top secret resources, or a high-end working tool. (Son)

Former researchers also recommended having flexibility of choices so that the recognition winners can pick the option that suits them the most. According to Achor (2016), the selection of rewards not only grant employees the chance to choose the most meaningful gift but also increases platform engagement. Irvine (2012) strongly suggest that any type of recognition scheme should have supported rewards. Long and Shields (2010) recommend combining both non-cash and cash reward. Reward strengthens the reinforcement effect of recognition (Skinner, 1953). In addition, well-designed rewards can help a peer-to-peer recognition program achieve the criteria of contingency, formality, importance of recognizer and being valued by recipient (Nelson, 2016).

4 Conclusion

The increasing trend in adopting employee recognition demonstrates that in general, organizations have raised concerns about the application of the HR management theory. Under this circumstance, the findings of this research contributed to HR researchers and

companies who intend to or in the process of implementing employee peer-to-peer recognition programs.

This research argues if the core purpose of giving recognition, which is to motivate people to continue a good action or behavior, is successfully performed. Hence, if a recognition program fails to motivate employees, it needs to be investigated and intervened. Researchers and organizations should be aware of the challenges that might happen during the implementation of a peer-to-peer recognition program. Employee relationships and understandings, organizational climate, and reward system are the sources that can cause troubles toward the program success. To the wider business world, this research offers practical solutions to deal with those challenges, such as building the culture and assigning monitor, to assist implementers to effectively make use of a peer-to-peer program in motivating employees.

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