

PEOPLE & HR LIVE CONFERENCE RECAP

Recognizing and Retaining a Distributed Workforce

BY JESSICA SWENSON | JUNE 15, 2026

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Tangible recognition of the unique needs employees face on a daily basis is a key to engagement and retention, says Heidi DeSautel, managing director of client delivery at [Growth Operators](#). This can show up as schedule flexibility, location flexibility, and customized benefit programs that enable employees to fulfill familial responsibilities and improve their quality of life in meaningful ways.

“We see a lot of generational differences on our team. We really try to be intentional, to meet them where they are, and provide them with support that they value as recognition in our workforce,” she said. “Just really understanding and valuing where they’re at and being intentional about providing that for them, so that they can support our clients the best they can.”

Methods to engage and recognize distributed employees were discussed by a panel of leaders at [From Day One's Minneapolis conference](#). The panel was moderated by Colleen Flaherty Manchester, professor of work and organizations and director of the center for HR and labor studies for Carlson School of Management.

Elissa Beach, director of HR for [WCG](#), saw her company embrace fully remote work after the pandemic, including a significant reduction in office space. WCG maintained its strong connections by establishing a cross-functional, multi-level project team that gathered data through employee research, focus groups, and surveys to inform a new strategy and playbook that help teams stay connected.

The playbook helps employees and managers identify potential team activities based on time allotments, financial budgets, and specific target categories like communication, collaboration, connection, or community. “We were ultimately recognized for this particular playbook in the remote work excellence category, but we continue to evolve it and add to it over time, and it's been something that all of our employees continue to use daily,” Beach said.



The group of leaders spoke about “Recognizing and Retaining a Distributed Workforce” on stage in Minneapolis

Other organizations intentionally create connection opportunities through

planned in-person and group events. Sherrie Kronforst, VP of HR for [Thrivent](#), discussed the summits, meetings, virtual events, and collaborative technology that her organization uses to maintain strong intercompany relationships.

Thrivent also offers a virtual recognition program through a platform called Pathfinders, and provides every employee an annual recognition budget each year. “Anybody can recognize anybody,” Kronforst said, “and every employee gets a budget every year, so they can [give] a social recognition, or a points-based recognition.”

Beach acknowledges that employees want to be seen by their broader work community and not just their boss. By shifting employee recognition more heavily to Microsoft Teams channels, she says that WCG has seen broadened engagement and amplified social connection between teams. This helps take the onus off of managers as a single source of recognition and employee celebration.

The continuous change and uncertainty in today’s workplace, especially regarding AI and job security, creates a clear need to build and sustain employee resilience. Acknowledging employee fears, creating supportive cultures, and encouraging peer support in collaborative spaces are some simple ways that employers can help teams to build that resilience, says DeSautel.

In addition to virtual connection points like Slack, DeSautel says, she sees clients create geographical hubs that enable employees to get together in person. “They try and get them together in person a couple times a year, so that they are able to meet each other and create that personal relationship. I think that’s one of the things that helps employees the most with resilience.”

Supporting a healthcare workforce that spans a variety of patient-facing facilities with varying roles, scopes of work, and computer access results in a completely different set of needs. Jen Bailey, VP of total rewards and HR shared services at [Allina Health](#), spoke about the multi-faceted approach Allina takes to equip its leaders to recognize employees in real time. This model includes everything from digital social recognition platforms to in-person leader huddles, group conversations, monetary and non-monetary recognition, and care-on-the-spot acknowledgements.

“It’s a really unique blend of trying to provide the leaders with the tools that they need and being able to meet the employees where they’re at, so it’s always evolving,” Bailey said.

To position employees for recognition through development and advancement opportunities, some organizations are focusing on leadership competencies, talent pipeline maximization, and elevated performance appraisal systems. “We’re really looking at that senior leadership group to be the folks who are leading us into the future,” said Kronforst, “so we have recently reset expectations for leaders; we’ve created executive level competencies.”

Through this refined performance management program, Thrivent’s leaders are better positioned for the proactive problem-solving and accelerated decision-making that will eliminate bottlenecks and maintain momentum on strategic organizational initiatives.

Leaders are also expected to not only reach their goals, but reach them in a way that aligns with the company’s culture and values. “It’s not just the what, but the how,” said Kronforst. “So, making sure that we’re connecting the dots, [looking at] what are we developing and how are we rewarding and recognizing the right behaviors.”

Increasing shortages of healthcare workers has caused Bailey and team to think creatively about how to maintain a strong talent pipeline. Allina has built apprentice programs for hard-to-fill clinical positions, creating internal mobility for existing Allina employees while opening up entry-level positions and career advancement options for external candidates.

Employees are encouraged to explore new roles within system clinics, hospitals, and specialty sites before Allina seeks external hires. “Making sure that we’re leveraging our internal talent before we go to the external market has been another big piece of that internal growth and recognition,” said Bailey. “So, investing in who and how is going to fill those roles for us, then leveraging that internal talent. How do we ensure that we’re providing those growth opportunities?”

For those external hires it does make, Allina launched a new program to improve the experience for first-year employees, which includes an in-house wellbeing navigation program designed in partnership with mental health physicians and EAP partners. Confidential navigators help employees locate and connect with the appropriate resources for their needs. The American Hospital Association has recognized this initiative, says Bailey, and the program's growth is increasingly driven by word-of-mouth rather than internal marketing efforts, demonstrating the value derived by employees.

She framed employee well-being support as a crucial element of HR: "from the retention standpoint, what can we offer as an employee that is unique and special for them, so that they can not only care for the community but for themselves."

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