



Executive Interview

The Connection Between Recognition, Engagement and Successful AI Adoption

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Achievers



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About David Bator



David Bator thinks and writes about how work could work. He leads Achievers Workforce Institute, a strategic practice whose focus on research, community and advisory empowers global executives with tactical, practical approaches to changing how the world works. David is passionate about people and has spent the last 20 years working closely with HR, IT and communications leaders to build programs that position individuals, teams and companies to grow.

About Achievers



Achievers is a global leader in employee recognition and reward software and the world's most utilized platform in the category. Supporting over 4 million employees across 164 countries, Achievers empowers organizations to drive higher engagement, retention and performance. Notable customers include General Motors, Meijer, Workday and Kellanova.

The Achievers platform offers flexible monetary and non-monetary recognition options, a global marketplace spanning nearly 190 countries and seamless enterprise-grade integrations with Workday, Microsoft, Slack, SAP and more. By acting as the connective tissue across HR tech stacks, Achievers enhances engagement, streamlines workflows and transforms data into meaningful action, creating a connected ecosystem that drives efficiency and alignment across the organization.

With over 272 million recognition moments captured, Achievers generates the richest behavioral insights in the industry, twice as much as any other provider. These insights not only reveal key behaviors, skills and team dynamics, but also fuel twice the usage compared to other platforms, as organizations invest in data-driven strategies that drive smarter decisions and stronger business outcomes.

Host Michael Rochelle



This interview was moderated by **Michael Rochelle**, Chief Strategy Officer and Principal HCM Analyst at Brandon Hall Group™, bringing his expertise in Human Capital Management. Michael has more than 30 years' experience in HR, IT, sales, marketing, business development and strategic and financial planning in Fortune 500 and venture-backed start-up organizations. Rochelle hosts the Excellence at Work podcast, where he explores trends, innovations and best practices in learning, talent and HR with leading executives and practitioners from around the world.

Recognition



HCM Excellence Awards®



Excellence In Action — Feedback and Recognition

1 Silver

1 Bronze

Learning That Lasts

Q Michael

AI transformation is accelerating, but employee readiness isn't. What does that gap actually look like inside organizations?

A David

McKinsey data shows that 92 percent of organizations are increasing their investment in AI, but only 1 percent are seeing a return on those investments right now. Our own research at Achievers Workforce Institute suggests that the gap is really a human gap. Globally, fewer than one in five employees feel trained, supported and prepared for AI. The truth is these projects are going to fail if people don't change their behavior.

Q Michael

What was the data point that most surprised you about employees feeling unprepared?

A David

One of the most surprising things about this wave of AI is that employees are experimenting on their own. If you think about any other transformation in the history of business, it's usually been pretty

Learning Drives Performance

Learning creates value only when employees apply new knowledge in their everyday work.

Skills Need Context

Skills only matter when they are connected to business priorities and measurable outcomes.

top-down. The powers that be decide on high what they're going to do and then they cascade that call to action down to the front lines. It's always been very much a command-and-control scenario, where the call to action is comply or else.

What's different and surprising about this transformation is that it is both top-down and bottom-up, because employees themselves are dabbling. They're using these tools in their own lives and their own work lives, either to offload the tasks they don't really love or to find ways to get some time back. These twin forces are creating an enormous amount of pressure and confusion for employees and I think this pressure is among the reasons that a whopping 92 percent of employees are unclear about what's expected of them at work.

Q Michael

You make a unique argument that this isn't a technology problem, it's a behavior and reinforcement problem. Can you expand on that?

A David

The central argument is that nothing changes if nothing changes. Any transformation fails without changing behavior and what we see is that it doesn't happen through tools or training alone. It doesn't happen because we really, really want it to, or

"... they all mean different things."

Context Shapes Capability

because we need it to. These things don't scale through mandates. They scale through positive reinforcement. That's one of the key insights from this paper.

Q Michael

You describe recognition as the missing system behind AI readiness. What do you mean by recognition as a system, rather than a cultural initiative?

A David

The research is pretty clear that when employees feel seen, when they feel valued, when they feel appreciated, they feel better. Our research shows that appreciation boosts morale and mental health, our sense of belonging, our desire to stay in an organization, our performance and the strength of our relationships. Good feelings are great and yet, for as long as I've been working, which is just about 30 years, I have never seen a good feeling get funded inside an organization. Warm fuzzies don't get funded. So recognition as a technology is not a system for scaling smiles. It is the most critical system of influence across the entire HR stack.

Build Your Own Skills Model

Effective skills frameworks reflect each organization's strategy, culture and future direction.

Know Your Learners

Better learning starts with understanding who learners are and what motivates them.

I can't think of another system that can impact every aspect of the employee experience the way recognition can, nor can I think of another technology that every employee can have access to, whether they're on the front lines or sitting at the front desk. The provocation is that this is bigger than HR. Frequent recognition, in particular, is the system of reinforcement that makes AI transformation, or indeed any transformation, stick. Most employees will repeat a behavior if they're recognized for it.

Q Michael

Leaders often treat recognition as a nice-to-have rather than a requirement. What's the missing link? Why is that such a big leap for them?

A David

They probably don't have proof. That's part of it. We see this even sometimes with existing customers who have been with us for years and years, where they regard recognition as their thank-you program. What the evidence shows is that it's so much more than that. The proof is that frequent recognition, where AI is concerned, really reinforces the exact conditions that AI requires: trust in leadership, clarity in moments of change, psychological safety and persistence as we experience disruption.

"... we have to know our learners."

Growth Through Challenge

A reframe is in order, which is among the reasons I'm delighted to have this conversation. Frequent recognition is a change agent and it's not because employees are pushed, but because it's an opportunity to signal to them, to support them and to reinforce the things that really, really matter.

Q Michael

How do you take recognition and translate strategy into everyday behavior?

A David

Challenge Builds Capability

The right level of challenge strengthens learning more effectively than making everything easier.

We have a saying: what gets recognized gets repeated. We say it because it's true. We see, for example, that when employees are recognized weekly, they are eight times more likely to see how their work connects to the bigger picture, nearly ten times more likely to be aligned to a company's purpose and fourteen times more likely to trust their manager. It's not just our research that shows this. Gallup's study of nearly 200,000 teams over 30 years points to frequent recognition as one of the key traits of the highest performing teams.

Measure Real Impact

Learning should reinforce business purpose, not simply improve completion rates.

"... this is how we grow."

Q Michael

Your research shows AI adoption fails when behaviors don't stick. What are the specific behaviors organizations need to reinforce?

A David

There are a number that I think are core. Part of the argument we make in the paper is that recognition helps build the infrastructure that AI depends on. Some of the core behaviors are trust, confidence, clarity and resilience. When we build infrastructure in this way, using frequent recognition in particular, it gives people the safety they're going to need during this period of experimentation, to experiment, to know that failing is okay as long as we fail fast and take the learnings with us. It gives us the push to continue to move forward and also the belief that the things we're doing today matter, even amidst a period of what feels like unprecedented change. So trust, confidence, clarity, resilience, those are some of the key behaviors for AI adoption.

A Shared Learning Vision

Q Michael

When those behaviors aren't reinforced consistently, what happens?

A David

Projects fail. People check out. People leave. We continue to see the misalignment and lack of productivity and all the things we care about get worse when people are not seen, valued and appreciated for their contribution.

Q Michael

Your report identifies distinct behavioral signals that drive AI transformation. Can you walk us through the ones you feel are most critical right now?

A David

I want to give a tip of the hat to my colleague Emma Harvie, who leads our global recognition insights practice. There are three from this report that jump out for me: learning, leadership and alignment.

Define Learning Principles

A shared learning philosophy creates consistency while allowing flexibility across the organization.

**"... pick small
and pick
passion."**

Starting with learning, Amy Edmondson offered a provocation during a keynote earlier this year when she said that the future of work was learning. She wasn't talking about learning technology, she was acknowledging that we're living through a period of change where every team and every workflow are being impacted. It becomes incumbent upon organizations to create trust and psychological safety, so folks can feel that they can fail fast and move on with the learnings from that misstep. What we see in particular with recognition is that it validates effort and persistence, not just mastery. When we reinforce progress and learning behaviors in real time, employees remain engaged and can stay in that skill-building mode even when outcomes take a while to materialize.

Start Small

*Passionate champions
and small wins create
momentum for larger
transformation.*

The second is leadership. Employees are looking to their leaders all the time, in good times, in bad times, in boring times. Our research shows that the best managers are great recognizers. With the advent of AI, when leaders recognize learning, adaptability and experimentation, they're modeling that psychological safety in action. Recognition becomes proof that if we try, if we adjust, if we learn, the organization values these things and they're not just risks to be avoided.

**"... beyond
job-to-skill
mapping."**

The last is alignment. I talked earlier about our research showing that 92 percent of employees are unclear about what's expected of them at work. Think about the velocity an organization is trying to achieve and by some estimates the AI opportunity is a \$10 trillion opportunity. If the left foot doesn't know what the right is doing, it impedes our progress, we stand still, or at worst we fall back.

Q Michael

Recognition also seems to drive better decision making. How does that connection work and what about the point you've made on data stewardship?

A David

Connect Skills to Careers

*Skills become
meaningful when
linked to career growth,
coaching and daily
work.*

Frequent recognition, when it is personal, specific and impact oriented, is a strong signal of what good looks like and of what great can look like. Our global data reveals a very consistent pattern: confidence, clarity and trust weaken when reinforcement is inconsistent. Recognition changes that for people. When we use recognition inside every workday, it strengthens the behaviors that this period of transformation relies on and it turns intent into action and strategy into practice. Where data stewardship is concerned, recognition has the opportunity to surface invisible behaviors that protect data

"... gather the data, then ask questions."

quality, whether it's disciplined inputs, verification, or careful execution. When we recognize this, organizations turn data stewardship from something that sounds boring and is sort of a background task into a shared expectation that can scale responsible AI use inside an organization.

Q Michael

When organizations struggle with recognition, is it a clarity problem, a learning problem, or an alignment problem, or some combination?

A David

Right now, I think it's clarity. I keep coming back to this alarming statistic that 92 percent of employees are unclear about what's expected of them at work. We're living through a period where we're arguably more disconnected than ever, even though we have more ways to connect than ever, most of them in the palm of our hands. Employees feel disconnected from the mission of the organization, from their manager, from their peers, from their purpose and from understanding what's expected of them at work. Recognition has an incredible opportunity to connect people and bring clarity in a time that feels pretty muddy to just about everyone.

AI Reveals Insights

AI delivers greater value by uncovering learning patterns than by creating more content.

Coach in the Flow of Work

AI coaching provides timely support when employees need help applying new skills.

"... the AI coach capacity."

Q Michael

Organizations aren't ignoring recognition altogether, but your report suggests frequency is the issue, not intent. Is that a fair takeaway?

A David

Recognition happens in different places and different ways inside organizations. We stop people in the hall, we kick off team meetings, or at our town hall we acknowledge people who have gone above and beyond. But what the research shows is that it's frequent recognition that's the thing that makes people feel better and perform better. Recognition isn't failing because people don't value it. It's failing because it's not arriving often enough to guide work in the moment. I used to tell customers that there's a major inflection point when, as a manager, you're recognizing employees meaningfully every month and then I'd challenge them: that's a bar so low you should be able to trip over it, because if you're paying attention every single day, your people are doing things that make a difference in the lives of

Recognition Builds Confidence

Frequent recognition gives employees the confidence to navigate constant change.

customers and colleagues. What we're seeing is that it's just not happening often enough. Only 17 percent of employees say they're recognized weekly and 28 percent are getting that minimum bar of monthly. Yet 92 percent of employees say they would put in more effort if they were recognized more frequently.

Q Michael

So, why aren't organizations doing it more frequently?

A David

There are a lot of reasons. People haven't developed a good habit around it. They worry about saying the wrong things. Some people don't know what to say, or don't know how to make it meaningful. Many individuals work for companies where recognition isn't part of the culture, so they have no good models to observe.

Q Michael

How do we move recognition from a nice-to-have to something operationally critical to supporting AI transformation?

"... who am I as a learner?"

Confidence Through Change

Recognition Builds Confidence

*Frequent recognition
gives employees the
confidence to navigate
constant change.*

A David

We're living through a period of what feels like unprecedented change, not just because it's pervasive but because of its pace. It feels faster than anything I've experienced before. Outside our companies, we see disruption that is cultural, economic and geopolitical. Inside an organization, most organizations are living through two to three major transformations at once, all competing for the same human energy.

Most employees aren't clear about what's expected of them at work and we've also been tracking change readiness as a practice since 2020. We've seen it steadily decline to the point where just 23 percent of employees feel capable of managing unexpected challenges. Yet, turning the frown upside down, when employees are recognized frequently and meaningfully, they feel better, they perform better and their confidence to manage change, or whatever might be lurking around the corner, soars. This is not a system for scaling smiles. It's a system of influence that connects people to the behaviors that matter most through this transformation, or probably just about any transformation.

Recognize Progress

Recognition should reinforce progress, not just celebrate final results.

Q Michael

In a very disruptive change environment, how does recognition directly help people stay the course, stay productive and stay confident?

A David

Recognition has the opportunity not just to celebrate the person who heroically reaches the top, but to be a system that helps propel people forward as they're on their way to the top. When you look at how performance is distributed in most organizations, maybe 15 percent of your people are top performers. The rest, 60 or 70 percent, is who you're trying to turn into top performers. Recognition becomes the sense maker, the system of good feeling, that provides clarity on what good looks like, what the gap between good and great looks like and gives people the confidence to keep on keeping on.

Q Michael

Managers are a primary reinforcement channel, but they often don't feel recognized themselves. Why does that gap exist?

Progress Creates Momentum

**"... the thing
that cements
commitment."**

A David

First, we sometimes forget that managers are employees themselves. I talk and write a lot about an organization's responsibility to create conditions so employees can do the best work of their lives and that's inclusive of managers. Managers are also on the front lines, coaching, cajoling and celebrating the people doing the frontline work. Our research shows that frequent recognition is one of the four traits of highly effective managers, alongside frequent contact, coaching and career development. Our research also shows that while recognition from peers can cement and signal culture, manager recognition is the thing that cements commitment.

**Managers Set
the Tone**

*Manager recognition
strengthens
commitment more than
peer recognition alone.*

Q Michael

If I'm leading a management team and looking across the board at my managers, what's the reset button for driving AI adoption through recognition and reinforcement? Where do I start?

A David

You're going to want to look at frequency first. I'd really be looking at weekly recognition and looking in particular at the very specific condi-

Lead with Frequency

Weekly recognition helps leaders reinforce the behaviors that matter most.

tions inside your organization that you're trying to establish or confirm. Lean into recognition here. This isn't the extra gesture. This is a signal to leaders and for leaders, that you're present, that you're attentive and that you're capable of guiding teams through this period of uncertainty. It's a critical tool in the toolbox of managers at this stage.

Q Michael

You've built a structure of pillars and foundational elements for why recognition is the engine behind AI adoption. Is there a way to articulate what happens if organizations don't get it right?

A David

What we see is that organizations continue to pour investment into their AI efforts and employees are feeling left behind. There has never been a more important time to highlight human contribution and make sure we're doing the things that allow our people to succeed. AI is not going to transform your organization. People are going to transform your organization. It's time to get the people part right.

Frequency Changes Behavior

People Drive AI

*AI transformation
succeeds only when
people change
alongside technology.*

People Before Technology

Q Michael

What are the first two or three things organizations should do differently, starting tomorrow, if they want AI adoption to succeed?

A David

The first is to acknowledge that the gap is not a technology gap. AI transformation, but probably any transformation, fails without behavior change and that has everything to do with people. The second thing, which may be surprising, is that frequent recognition is the engine that can enable that behavior change and do it at scale. My mother-in-law often reminds me that it's nice to be nice, and that's true. Frequent recognition makes people feel good, but it also helps them perform better. The reframe is this: Recognition and reward aren't the cherry on top at the end of your AI transformation project. They're the system that drives it.

Q Michael

Closing thoughts?

Connection Drives Change

*Consistent
recognition keeps
people connected
through periods of
transformation.*

A David

AI adoption is independent of humans in the sense that we're looking for where the bridges are, but we've got to keep people connected. Whether you want to be successful in anything, it's going to come down to the human element and the human element is going to drive AI adoption. If you have disengaged, unrecognized, unstable, disconnected people, it's going to come down to failure across the organization and those mistakes can lead to tremendous risk, setbacks and worse.

The recipe is straightforward: Acknowledge that the gap is a human gap, treat recognition as the reinforcement system that makes any transformation stick and move from monthly to weekly recognition that is personal, specific and impact oriented. People may not know exactly what to do about AI adoption itself, but every leader and manager knows how to stay connected to their people and recognize them for what they're going through. That's the tangible first step.



Here are some ways to listen to
the interview on Brandon Hall
Group's Excellence at Work
Podcast:

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Shaping Excellence in the Future of Work

Our Vision

A world where every HR organization drives business transformation through human capital excellence.

Our Mission

To provide CHROs, CLOs, and workforce leaders with the intelligence, tools, and community they need to drive business transformation through human capital excellence.

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