

Many employees feel underappreciated at work and would like a 'thank you' more often

November 20 2020, by Jenesse Miller



The workplace is full of missed opportunities for thanking others, a USC study finds. Credit: Pixabay

A new USC study finds many workers across various job sectors feel underappreciated, especially by their bosses, and roughly half of

employees say they are thanked less than once per week by their supervisors.

The authors say their study generally shows that the workplace is full of missed opportunities for thanking others.

Researchers with the USC Marshall School of Business also found employees value written thanks over spoken expressions of gratitude and prefer their managers to deliver the message one-on-one instead of in front of larger groups.

The study's authors first asked 58 professionals to journal for one month about their experiences with gratitude and expressions of thanks in the workplace. Next, they conducted an online survey of a national panel of 1,200 American professionals about their preferences for written and spoken thank-you's at work.

Respondents reported being thanked by colleagues more frequently than by bosses. Three-quarters (75.1%) say they are thanked by colleagues on at least a weekly basis compared to about half (52.9%) who say they are thanked at least weekly by their supervisors. The results were published in *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*.

USC research finds that a personalized, written thanks still matters

The study showed employees value expressions of thanks in writing because of the time and effort it takes, the specificity of the gratitude expressions and the ability to use it as a record of their performance.

Another top-ranked reason is that employees enjoy re-reading thank-you notes when they need a morale boost, said study author Peter Cardon,

professor of clinical business communication and academic director for the MBA for Professionals & Managers program at USC Marshall.

"We wondered if handwritten thanks had gone out of style, but for one-quarter to a third of our respondents, handwritten thanks were right at the top of the list," he said. Within the group that participated in the one month of gratitude journaling, respondents described in great detail handwritten notes they'd received years earlier: "They described pulling them out on a rainy day, and the handwritten form really made a big difference."

Cardon and study co-authors Janna Wong and Cole Christie were surprised that this preference for handwritten thanks was consistent across age groups, with millennials enjoying handwritten notes as much as those from older generations.

Prior research overwhelmingly shows that when employees feel appreciated and thanked, they are happier, more engaged with their work and more committed to their colleagues and organizations, the researchers noted.

Based on the new study, the authors suggest that managers should learn to give thanks more often and in a variety of forms. They should also understand that one-on-one expressions of thanks to their employees are often preferred to an expression of gratitude in front of others.

"During Thanksgiving and the holidays, managers and leaders are likely to send out mass emails or other digital messages to thank employees for their efforts. It's really a missed opportunity," Cardon said. "Our research really shows managers need to focus on personalized, individual thank-you expressions."

Now more than ever, a 'thank you' at work means a

lot

Other key findings of the study:

- Employees value expressions of thanks in spoken form because they are spontaneous and allow for more verbal and nonverbal expressiveness.
- Spoken thanks is sometimes perceived as more appropriate for public recognition and smaller efforts.
- Workers generally prefer being thanked in person as opposed to in front of others.
- Men are more likely to prefer being thanked in front of others than women.
- Millennials are most likely to want both written and spoken thanks, while older employees increasingly prefer spoken thanks.

The study's authors point out that management consultants often suggest that leaders and other professionals should express thanks more often in the workplace, but that research about gratitude in the workplace is limited. With millions of Americans working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many are yearning for connection and the feeling of being appreciated, Cardon noted.

"We're learning from public polling that people are more grateful for what they have in their [personal lives](#), but at the same time there's a lot of anxiety in their professional lives," he said. "That's when hearing that 'thanks' could be particularly meaningful."

More information: Peter W. Cardon et al. Preferences for Written and Spoken Expressions of Thanks Among American Professionals, *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/2329490620973002](https://doi.org/10.1177/2329490620973002)

Provided by University of Southern California

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