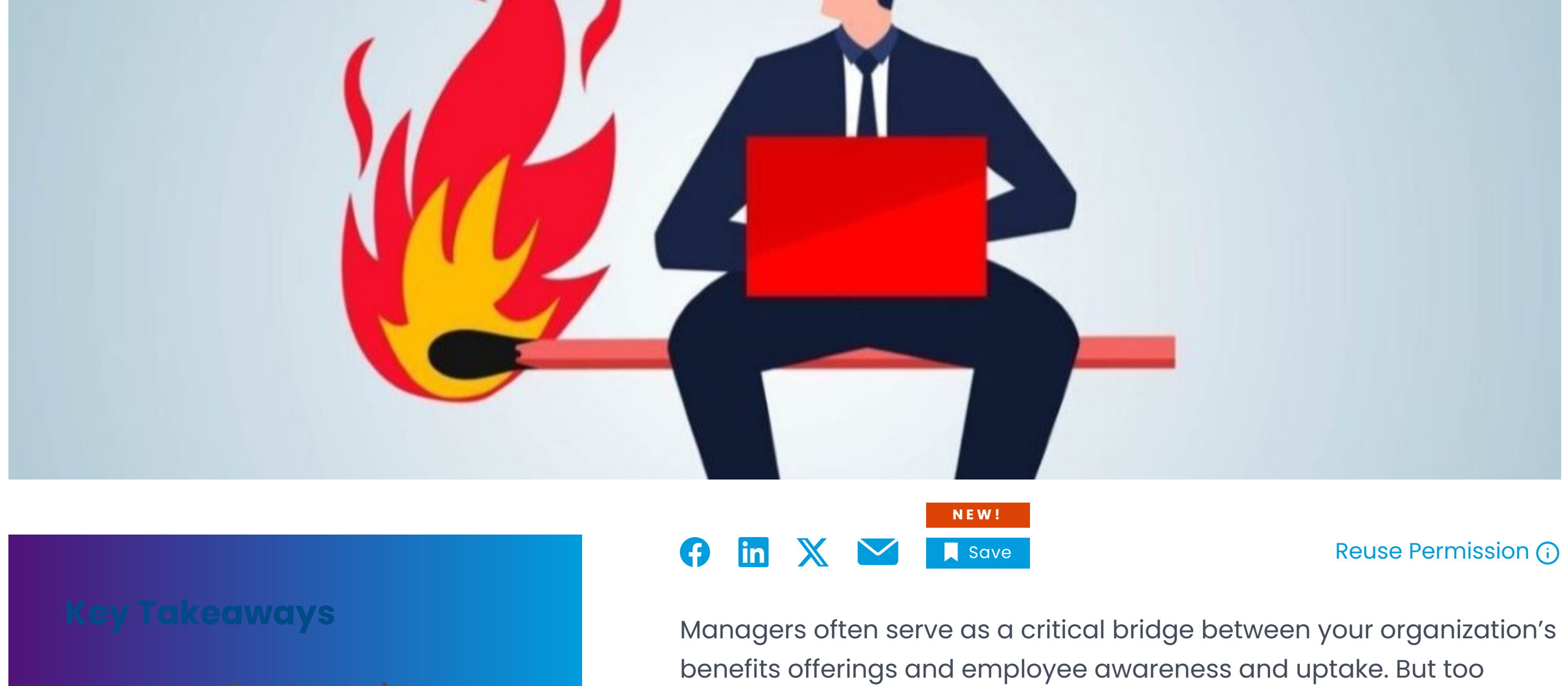


The Road to Rewards Progress Runs Through Your Managers

Workspan Article
June 10, 2026

By [Beth Braverman](#)

- Employee Experience
- Workforce Engagement
- Employee Benefits
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- People Analytics



Key Takeaways

- **About the (perception) gap:** Managers' interpretations of what employees value don't always align with these workers' true wants and expectations.
- **Burnout is fueling the problem:** WorldatWork research showed many people leaders are overworked and disengaged.
- **Data crystallized the paradigm:** Managers reported the lowest employee Net Promoter Score for any role level in the study as well as weaker personal satisfaction across career development, recognition and compensation.
- **You can fix this:** HR and total rewards professionals play a critical role in addressing the defined challenges with training, resources and tools.

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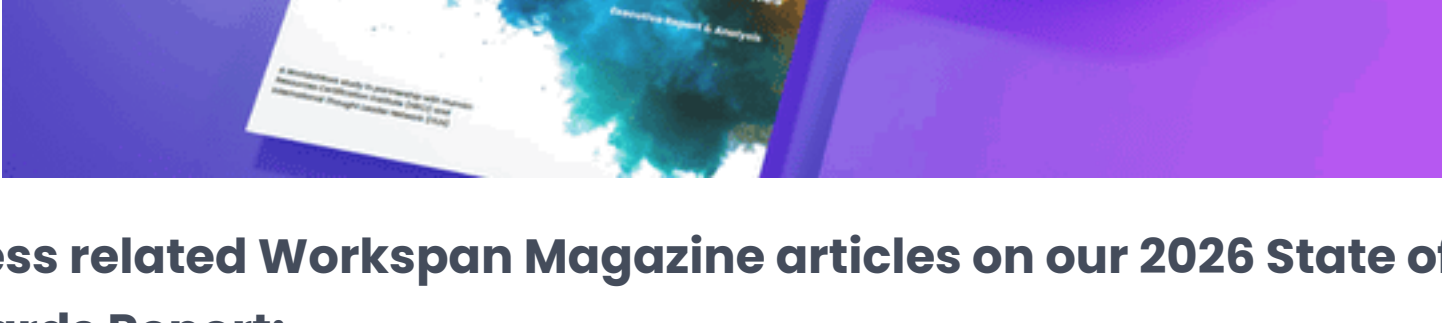
Managers often serve as a critical bridge between your organization's benefits offerings and employee awareness and uptake. But too often, managers (likely some or yours) are failing to reliably make that connection.

Research for [WorldatWork's 2026 State of Rewards Report](#) found that managers' perceptions of what employees value don't always align with these workers' true wants and expectations, especially as the latter move through various career and life stages.

"Employee expectations around things like flexibility, purpose and time off appear to have shifted faster than the systems managers rely on to understand them," said Sue Holloway, a content director at WorldatWork.

According to Amy Dufrane, the CEO of the Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI), rewards programs fail in execution more often than they fail in theory. It's a structural issue that can become a drag on benefits in the form of return on investment.

She stated managers need to explain and reinforce the organization's rewards programs. But if those leaders are unclear, disengaged or stretched too thin, the message can get lost.



Access related Workspan Magazine articles on our 2026 State of Rewards Report:

- [Employees' Reward Priorities Evolve. WorldatWork and HR Must, Too.](#)
- [Why Employee Satisfaction with Your Rewards Isn't Enough](#)
- [A Graphic Look at WorldatWork's State of Rewards Report](#)
- [The Perception Gap: Managers and Employees View Rewards Differently](#)
- [Your Rewards Should Be Geared Toward the Employee Life Cycle](#)
- [Meaning and Purpose Are Critical Pieces of the Rewards Puzzle](#)

Access related Workspan Daily articles on the report:

- ["Something Bigger" Than Pay: What Really Spurs Employee Retention?](#)
- [There Is a Distinct Power in Knowing What Matters to Your Workers](#)

Recognizing the Value of Rewards Beyond Pay

The State of Rewards Report showed managers recognize pay as the primary driver of employee retention but misread what matters beyond it — overvaluing career growth, while undervaluing flexibility, benefits and paid time off. Despite these gaps, nearly 70% of surveyed managers said they were highly confident in their understanding of what employees want.

"This tells us the issue isn't a lack of confidence — it's a lack of visibility," Holloway said. "Managers often think they know what employees value, but they tend to overestimate or underestimate employee preferences for certain reward components."

The widest gap between what employees wanted and what managers thought they wanted emerged in career advancement. The imbalance here was 15 percentage points (37% versus 22%).



"[Managers] might, potentially, be projecting what they think their employees should value versus what they actually do," said Annie Lee, who oversaw the WorldatWork study as director of research and insights.

The research showed many factors contribute to the misalignment between managers and their employees when it comes to rewards. In many cases, [managers are simply overworked](#). In addition to being responsible for delivering the employee experience, Dufrane said managers typically deal with heavier workloads themselves.

Manager responsibilities have expanded while their stress levels remain elevated. Post-pandemic reorganizations and the pan-industry push for artificial intelligence (AI) adoption have added to manager stress, along with a general shift toward a more employee-centric workplace.

"At a high level, managers are expected to deliver things like career development and recognition; those are two key priorities," said Michelle Miller, an HR consultant with insurance brokerage HUB International. "But at a high leadership level, they're not always delivering those same things to their managers."

Low Satisfaction Levels

Managers reported the lowest employee [Net Promoter Score](#) (eNPS) for any role level (23.2% promoters) as well as weaker personal satisfaction across career development, recognition and compensation, according to the WorldatWork report. Therefore, the least satisfied segment of the workforce is the most responsible for delivering the rewards experience.

Such manager dissatisfaction is more than simply an engagement metric.

"People consistently point to relationships, [purpose and meaningful work](#) as the reasons they stay, significantly outweighing compensation and benefits," Dufrane said. "When managers don't have visibility into their teams' unique value sets, even well-designed programs can miss the mark."

In practice, this means communication feels more transactional than contextual, Holloway said. Worse, some important conversations with employees about their rewards or work may not happen at all.

Finding Solutions

HR and total rewards (TR) professionals can take several steps to address such challenges. For example, the experts interviewed for this article stated HR/TR pros can build feedback loops on rewards preferences to equip managers — the segment delivering rewards to their employees — with [insights into what employees value](#).

"There's a structural piece of making sure that managers have the tactical things they need to support their employees, but also culturally, they need to feel supported," Lee said. "There needs to be an intentional cultural enablement that helps support those resources and the tools."

Such enablement requires a recommitment from people leaders to invest in the manager experience, while also training them in how to solicit feedback and capture that data in informal but trackable ways.

In addition to training, managers generally require tools to [communicate the full value of TR](#), beyond salary, personalizing their message to individual needs and working to [make benefits easier to understand](#). Lee said organizations also can focus on maintaining touchpoints with hiring managers to ensure they're using the provided tools and programs.

Finally, organizations should work to build a distinct value proposition for their managers that includes [career pathing](#), personal and professional development, and [recognition programs](#).

"If total rewards leaders aren't reviewing manager-specific data on employee satisfaction and comparing that against their individual contributor results, they're missing some leading indicators around *manager* disengagement," Miller said. "And, ultimately, that's going to lead to *employee* disengagement in the next six to 12 months."

Check out additional (non-State of Rewards) articles from our June–July 2026 issue:

- [5 Minutes With ... Sven Skillrud, NIKE Inc.'s TR and People Solutions VP](#)
- [Want to Use Rewards to Boost Your Culture? Here's What the Research Says](#)
- [Executive Decisions: The Impacts \(and Incentives\) of a Co-CEO Model](#)

Editor's Note: Additional Content

For more information and resources related to this article, see the pages below, which offer quick access to all WorldatWork content on these topics:

- [Employee Benefits](#)
- [Employee Experience](#)
- [People Analytics](#)
- [Total Rewards](#)
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Beth Braverman is a freelance writer for Workspan, who has been covering workplace issues, benefits and personal finance for more than a decade.

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