

Human-Centered, Data-Powered: Reflections from Workhuman Live 2025

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Workhuman held their annual industry analyst day in Denver alongside their Workhuman Live conference, bringing together curious minds from across HR to learn, network and inspire one another. This year's event focused on making work better, through technology of course, but also through cultural and leadership evolution. At the heart of this is recognition—far more than a feel good for the business, recognition is poised to bring insight into skills, coaching, performance and more.

[Learn more](#)





Introduction

After spending a few energizing days at **Workhuman Live** — preceded by an immersive **analyst day** — it's clear that this isn't just another HR event. It's something else entirely. Workhuman has created an environment that's not only free from the typical sales pressures of many conferences but intentionally designed to deepen learning, build community, and shift the conversation around how we recognize and support people at work.

While many still see Workhuman as *the* recognition company — and that's not wrong — what stood out most this year is that Workhuman is also a **data company**. One that's making sure recognition stays relevant in the future of work by turning real moments of recognition into actionable intelligence about people, skills, and performance. All while working to solve some of HR's biggest problems: retention, engagement, culture, and people manager capabilities.





From Recognition to Human Intelligence™

The message coming out of **Analyst Day** was loud and clear: Workhuman is building a powerful **Human Intelligence™** platform — one that leverages the data found in recognition messages and moments of recognition in ways that go far beyond moments of praise.

With Human Intelligence™, Workhuman is:

- **Uncovering skills:** Using recognition data to identify not only the skills people *demonstrate*, including hidden or emergent skills they might not even realize they leverage.
- **Gaining people insights:** The platform can surface key workforce signals like **flight risk**, patterns of influence, and engagement trends — derived from peer-to-peer recognition behaviors and language.
- **Enabling micro-coaching moments:** Managers gain access to personalized, real-time insights that fuel **targeted coaching**, so they can support team members in meaningful development— at exactly the right time.
- **Helping managers add more value:** Through better, more timely insights, managers are able to more effectively understand and support their teams, so they can help remove obstacles to performance and productivity.

This isn't traditional HR data or performance review metrics. It's **real-world, real-time behavioral data** that helps organizations understand their people at a much deeper level. And it's aimed at unlocking value at all levels—for employees, their managers, and the organization's objectives.

Key themes

Throughout the event, several key themes continued to surface across sessions and conversations:

1

Leadership

While AI was on display as expected, the focus was on how to prepare for it, get real about its impacts, and ensure it's used in *human-centered* ways that augment, not replace, the human workforce. Key to this is unlocking leadership capabilities that are necessary to create safe places for experimentation and real-world application of AI.

Beyond AI, people managers are the key to unlocking cultures of agility and continuous learning. Managers set the tone for the day-to-day operations of a team, making them critical for reinforcing the values and needs of the organization, and helping their people rise to meet those needs.

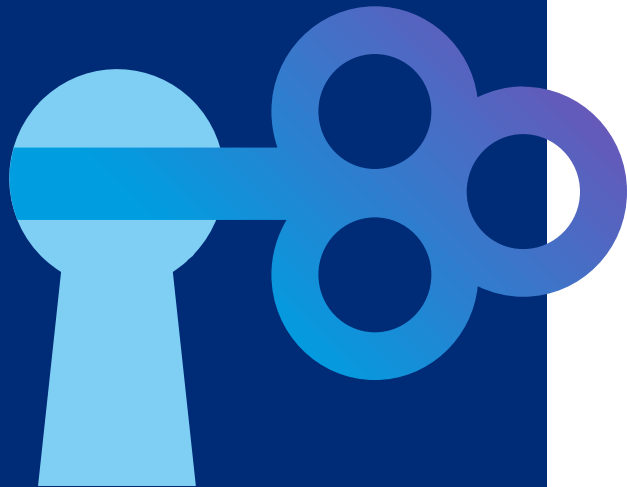
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Skills

Business is moving fast, and companies need to stay agile. But traditional views on work can slow us down, making it harder to tap into the full potential of our people. That's where skills come in—they offer a smarter way to match what our workforce can do with what the business needs, even as those needs evolve.

Not surprisingly, skills were a big focus at the event—how to spot them, unlock them, and use them to boost mobility and performance. One exciting angle? Recognition data. It's a powerful, often overlooked source of insight into the skills people actually use and demonstrate on the job. It helps fill a major data gap by revealing and validating skills in real time.

We even presented a session on this topic, tied to a white paper we co-authored with Workhuman. It digs deeper into how recognition can surface meaningful skill data. You can check it out [here](#).



3

Experience & culture

Creating better employee experiences doesn't mean removing all friction — it means creating the *right* friction, the kind that challenges people and supports growth. For example, getting the giver of recognition to stop and think about the context of the praise they're giving (what behaviors or values were on display, what was the impact, etc.). This leads to better data and better overall insights. But underpinning all of this is culture—no matter the experience provided, if there isn't a culture to support it and make it “the way we do things,” efforts here can be futile.

4

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

In a time when some organizations are pulling back from DEI due to external pressures, Workhuman doubled down. DEI wasn't just a mention — it was woven into the DNA of the event, reflecting Workhuman's values and long-term commitment to equity and belonging. In her session, “Beyond the Backlash: Reframing DEI is the Key to Strategic Resilience”, speaker [Fadjanie Cadet](#) outlined how HR can reposition their DEI efforts to better align with business outcomes—shifting from an inclusion strategy to a talent retention strategy for example, where many of the tactics may be the same, but the goals and how impact gets measured looks different.





Spotlight on the keynotes.

Adam Grant opened the event with a thought-provoking talk on how to unlock potential in ourselves and others. He encouraged shifting from asking for feedback (which focuses on past mistakes) to asking for advice (which points us forward). He also emphasized the importance of identifying "culture carriers" — especially those who may be disagreeable givers: people who challenge the status quo because they care deeply about the organization. One of his most powerful messages: don't wait to feel confident before you act — confidence often comes after you take the leap. This is perhaps especially fitting given the conference's emphasis on AI.

Trevor Noah closed out the event with humor and insight, reminding us that great leadership is about communication, not certainty. As Microsoft's Chief Question Officer, he highlighted the value of curiosity and encouraged leaders to ask more questions — not to avoid looking ignorant, but to unlock learning and connection. His standout quote: "A leader doesn't need to be sure — they need to be communicative." It was a powerful end to an event focused on human connection and shared growth.

During the "HR Leadership Now: Navigating Uncertainty with Clarity and Impact" keynote, **Kelly Jones, Chief People Officer at Cisco, and Kerry Dryburgh, EVP of People Culture and Communications & Chief Human Resources and Communications Officer at BP**, shared insights on AI readiness, revealing that only 18% of companies feel prepared for the necessary workforce changes. They highlighted a shift from a knowledge economy to an innovation economy and emphasized that effective leadership is crucial for solving problems. They also stressed that "leadership without moral courage is just weak tea," underscoring the importance of managing through communication and active listening.

Does recognition really still matter?

In a business climate defined by increasing pressure to produce more with less, recognition might seem like a “nice-to-have”—but that’s a big miss. Done right, it’s actually a powerful business tool. And that’s exactly what Workhuman is proving.

When recognition is timely, peer-driven, and aligned with real impact—paired with meaningful rewards—it drives better retention, stronger performance, and a steady stream of high-quality data. Not just feel-good moments, but real behavioral insights that reveal how work gets done and who’s doing it well.

95%

of frequently recognized employees stay when recognition program is designed in alignment with business and talent objectives

Workhuman is intentional about all of it—from the curated rewards marketplace designed to fuel more recognition, to AI that enhances (not automates) recognition messages, capturing rich context without losing the human touch.

Even better, this data doesn’t just sit in a silo. It’s pushed to HCMs and talent intelligence platforms, powering succession, performance, and workforce planning. So yes, recognition still matters—maybe more than ever.





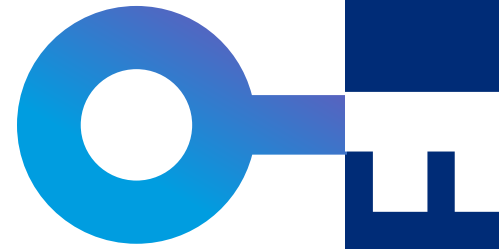
Our advice to Workhuman

To Workhuman

Workhuman, you delivered an exceptional experience — one that ***centered on the attendee, prioritized connection over commerce, and created space for both insight and inspiration***. You resisted the urge to maximize sponsorship dollars or flood the event with vendors, and in doing so, you protected something rare in this industry: a conference that actually feels human. The vibe was somehow both electric and zen — a true reflection of the values you promote.

Our advice? Keep doing exactly that. ***The industry needs more spaces like this — spaces that invite curiosity, connection, and honest conversation***. But don't neglect the chance to keep pushing the envelope. You showcased a great mix of celebrity speakers, but what can you do to amplify more unheard voices? You showcased the power of belonging, gratitude and recognition, which are all celebratory. There's also the gritty reality of work: burnout, active disengagement, and consequences to under-delivery on EVP. Human work isn't always celebratory; how can you use this event to lean into the uncelebratory side of work? And don't forget the operational rigor—bring more sessions that speak to system change, leadership accountability, speaking success in the language of the business and so forth. We do HR a disservice when we lean into hugs and happiness all the time.

On the product front, stay focused. The unveiling of Human Intelligence™ and the broader vision for recognition-powered people insights is a game-changer. It opens up enormous potential — and with that, the risk of trying to be everything at once. Stay close to your customers, and not just HR, but the needs of employees and leaders, too. ***Keep listening — not just for what they say they need now, but for what they don't yet know they need***. You're onto something big. Keep leading with clarity, focus, and purpose.





Our advice to HR leaders

To HR leaders

Workhuman Live didn't just deliver great content — it delivered value that transcends the event. It was a ***reminder that recognition isn't just a feel-good initiative***. It's a business necessity, providing a window into who your people are, what they're capable of, and how they're driving your culture and your business forward.

And maybe most importantly, it reminded us that the future of work is deeply human — ***powered by insights, enabled by technology, but always centered on people.***

If you're considering building a recognition program or you're looking for a source of authentic people data to better power your decision-making, Workhuman could be a great partner. Not only do they make significant investments in maintaining a team of experts to help launch and optimize recognition programs, they also offer an ROI guarantee. If you don't meet the expected ROI, all fees are refunded. It's a novel idea, and one that has worked well so far in its first year on offer. Workhuman hasn't issued any ROI refunds to date, which means their customers are seeing the value they expected.

But **recognition is about more than software**. This is a business play that requires aligning leaders and priorities, empowering managers, and equipping the entire organization with the right mindset. There's something in this for everyone if you help them see it.



