

The End of Year Recognition Gap

How to plan, build, and send a holiday recognition program every employee can actually use, frontline teams included. Set it up in an afternoon, not a week.



57%

of HR professionals already work beyond normal capacity, before holiday gifting lands on top

SHRM

43%

of U.S. adults are sitting on at least one unused gift card, about \$27 billion in total

BANKRATE, 2024

47%

of frontline workers say their company has two cultures: one for them and one for everyone else

UKG, 2026

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WHO THIS IS FOR

HR and people leaders running holiday or year-end recognition for teams that don't sit at a desk: stores, sites, shifts, and crews.

Want to see it built? The video walkthrough is on the [End of Year Recognition Gap guide page](#).

Where holiday gifting **breaks down**

End of year is when employees notice whether they felt seen all year, and when HR feels every gap in the process. These are the five gaps we hear about most, and the fix for each.

GAP 1

It's manual

Someone buys cards one at a time, chases a vendor, or packs boxes. At scale it eats days of HR time.

Fix: one bulk send from a list.

GAP 2

One size fits nobody

A basket with wine misses people who don't drink. Pasta misses people who are gluten free. Swag sits in a drawer.

Fix: let each person choose.

GAP 3

Unclaimed gifts are lost money

Budget goes out, some of it never gets used, and none of it comes back.

Fix: a claim period that returns unused value.

GAP 4

Redemption friction

Accounts, passwords, and work emails that frontline staff don't have. The gift sits there.

Fix: guest redemption, plus text, print, or QR delivery.

GAP 5

No visibility after the send

Did it land? Did they use it? With a box in the mail, nobody knows.

Fix: track claims and redemptions, then nudge.

UNDERNEATH IT ALL

It feels generic at scale

500 identical cards read like a mail merge, even when the intent is good.

Fix: brand the send and personalize the message.

“ I've got dozens of branded cutting boards at home from a past recognition program. Two of them are propping up a lopsided piece of equipment in my garage.

Kwesi Thomas, Head of Account Management, Guusto, on why the message and the choice beat any single physical gift



WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

2x

Gallup found employees who don't feel adequately recognized are **twice as likely to say they'll quit in the next year**,⁵ and 38% of U.S. workers plan to look for a new job in the first half of 2026.⁴ In frontline sectors the risk is higher: accommodation and food services lose 3.5% of workers to quits every month, versus 2.1% across the private sector.¹⁰ The holiday gift is one of the most visible recognition moments of the year. It either shows people you were paying attention or confirms they weren't seen.

Make the decisions first

The setup takes minutes. The decisions are what take time, so settle them before anyone opens a dashboard. Fill this in with your finance partner and leadership sponsor.

“ The setup wasn't what took time. The decisions did. Once they were made, the whole company's holiday gifting was done in minutes.

Kwesi Thomas, Head of Account Management, Guusto



1. What's the total budget?

Know it now. Waiting until the 11th hour is what forces rushed, generic choices.

2. Amount per person

Flat for everyone, or tiered by tenure or role?

3. Who's included?

Check every box that applies.

- ☐ Full-time ☐ Part-time ☐ Seasonal
☐ Every site and shift ☐ Contractors

4. Who is it from?

The CEO, the leadership team, or each site leader?

5. Claim period

How long before unclaimed value returns to your budget?

- ☐ 3 months ☐ 6 months ☐ Other: _____

6. How will people redeem?

Guest redemption skips account creation.

- ☐ Guest redemption on ☐ Account required

7. How will it reach them?

Pick the channel your people actually check.

- ☐ Email ☐ Text (SMS) ☐ Printed link or QR
☐ Link in Teams or chat

8. Send date

Send now, or schedule it close to the holidays.

SUGGESTED TIMELINE



Brand the send, not the gift

Branding is the difference between a gift from your company and a random gift card email. Put the brand on the experience and leave the choice of gift to the person.

STEP 2 · BUILD THE LIST

Pull one list that covers full-time, part-time, seasonal and every site, and add a mobile number for anyone without a work email. Flag who should get a printed link on shift. The pre-flight checklist on page 7 catches anything missing before you send.

STEP 3 · SETUP CHECKLIST

- ☐ Create a dedicated workspace for the program, e.g. "Holiday Rewards 2026." It holds the branding, budget, and any teammates who help send.
- ☐ Fund the workspace. Credit card is fastest; other payment options are available, and you can move funds over from another program's workspace.
- ☐ Upload your logo. A holiday version works well. It shows on every reward.
- ☐ Set brand colors for the header and buttons.
- ☐ Add a default gift image to set the tone.
- ☐ Create a reason, like "Happy Holidays," and give it a badge image.

WHERE SWAG FITS, AND WHERE IT DOESN'T

	BRANDED SWAG	CHOICE-BASED REWARD
Best for	Onboarding, milestones, a company win worth commemorating	Holidays, year-end thank-yous, frontline appreciation
Feels like	"You're part of the team"	"We know you, pick what you'd enjoy"
Logistics	Sizes, shipping, inventory	One list, one send
Lands with	People who like the item	Everyone, by design

"We love swag, but there's a time for swag, and then there's a time for other rewards." Joe Facciolo, Co-Founder and CEO, Guusto

“ We're sending this with the company's brand, its logo and its colors, so the message connects back to us. But the actual reward is their choice.

Kwesi Thomas, Head of Account Management, Guusto

“ Not everyone wants to be recognized the same way, and technology is too advanced now for us to start at the lowest common denominator of a one-size-fits-all approach.

Joey Price, CEO, Jumpstart HR, on HR on the Frontline

Research backs the instinct: in a Stanford study, recipients valued gifts they chose or asked for more than gifts picked for them, while givers wrongly assumed cash-like gifts were the least appreciated.⁹ Shoppers agree: gift cards are the second-most popular holiday gift in the U.S.⁸

Protect the budget, **remove the friction**

Two settings do most of the work: a claim period so unused value comes back, and guest redemption so nobody gets stuck creating an account.

SETTING 1

Claim period

When you send, funds leave your balance and become claimable. If a reward isn't claimed by the end of the claim period, the full amount returns to your workspace balance.

How to choose: a holiday gift is meant to be enjoyed in the season, so lean shorter. Kwesi suggests three to six months. The walkthrough uses three.

- Shorter: more value comes back faster, and the gift stays tied to the holidays.
- Longer: more time for people on leave or seasonal schedules.

Why it matters: 43% of U.S. adults hold at least one unused gift card, worth \$244 on average.¹

SETTING 2

Guest redemption

Recipients claim and redeem the full amount like a guest checkout, with no new account and no login.

Turn it on when:

- Most recipients won't use the platform day to day.
- Frontline staff don't have a work email or company device.
- You don't want to teach a new tool in the busiest month of the year.

Leave accounts on if you're launching year-round recognition and want people in the platform from day one.

“ If something feels like extra work, it's gonna get dropped immediately. The time to complete has to be in seconds, not minutes.

Kendall Carroll, Director of Product Management, UKG, on HR on the Frontline

RULE OF THUMB

Every step between "you've got a gift" and "I picked what I wanted" costs you redemptions. Only 4 in 10 frontline workers have access to communication tools at work,³ so plan for text, printed links, or a QR code alongside email. Fully on-site, non-remote workers already report the lowest engagement of any group (29%),⁶ and 51% of non-manager frontline workers say they don't feel valued.⁷

One message, 1,000 people, still personal

Your upload file can carry a different message for every row. Start from one strong message, then personalize with first names, sites, teams, or a line from each manager.

KEEP IT HUMAN

- **Make it warm.** Celebrate the year you had.
- **Be honest.** If it was a hard year, say so, then look ahead.
- **Look forward** to the season and the year coming.
- **Skip the laundry list.** It's a thank-you, not a business review.
- **Name the person** and, where you can, something specific they did.

PERSONALIZATION FIELDS IN YOUR CSV

COLUMN	EXAMPLE
first_name	Maria
last_name	Lopez
email / mobile	maria@... or +1 555...
message	Your personalized note

Tip: build the message column with a mail merge or a spreadsheet formula, e.g. combine a greeting, the first name, and a site-specific line.

HOLIDAY MESSAGE TEMPLATES TO COPY

AFTER A STRONG YEAR

Hi {first_name},

What a year. Everything we got done happened because of people like you showing up, shift after shift. This is a small thank-you from all of us: pick something you'll enjoy. Happy holidays, and here's to an even better year ahead.

AFTER A TOUGH YEAR

Hi {first_name},

This year asked a lot of all of us, and you kept going. We see that, and we're grateful. Please take this as a thank-you and choose something that makes your season a little easier. We're looking forward to next year together.

FROM A SITE LEADER

Hi {first_name},

Thank you for everything you did at {site} this year, especially {specific_moment}. The team noticed, and so did I. Enjoy this one on us, and have a great holiday season.

“ It can't be, "Thank you everybody for a great quarter." It has to be unique, specific, and in real time.

Aman Malhi, Director of People & Culture, Refrigerative Supply, on HR on the Frontline

The whole list, in one send

Bulk orders let you send to everyone at once instead of one by one. The walkthrough sends \$50 to each person with a pre-written message on the CSV.

SEND IT IN FIVE MOVES

- 1 Start a bulk order and choose the amount.
- 2 Pick your reason, e.g. "Happy Holidays."
- 3 Import the CSV with names, contact info, and messages.
- 4 Choose delivery and timing: now, or a scheduled date.
- 5 Review the order and confirm.

DELIVERY OPTIONS

CHANNEL	BEST WHEN
Email + SMS	You have personal email or mobile numbers. Most direct.
Printed link	Handing gifts out on the floor or tucking one into a card.
Copied link	Sharing through Teams or another channel your people use.

You can also set the language and notify each recipient's manager.

PRE-FLIGHT CHECKLIST

- ☐ Workspace balance covers the full order: recipients × amount. (The walkthrough hit this and had to trim the list.)
- ☐ Every row has a name and a working email or mobile number.
- ☐ No duplicates, and leavers since the list was pulled are removed.
- ☐ Seasonal, part-time, and every site are included on purpose, not by accident.
- ☐ Message reads well with a real name in it. Check three rows.
- ☐ Send a test gift to yourself and open it on your phone.
- ☐ Schedule date and time zone confirmed.
- ☐ Managers know it's coming so they can mention it on shift.



And that's it. That was the whole list. You could do that for a couple thousand people.

Joe Facciolo, Co-Founder and CEO, Guusto



The gift only counts if people use it

Redemption is the make-or-break moment. If the reward is flexible and claiming it is easy, the gift lands and the budget isn't wasted. Then watch what happens.

WHAT RECIPIENTS SEE

- Your logo, badge, and gift image, so it's clearly from you.
- Your message and the reward amount.
- With guest redemption on, they click through and redeem the full amount without signing up.

“If people have to go through three, four or five steps just to figure out how to get their gift, you've erased a lot of the goodwill behind it.

Kwesi Thomas, Head of Account Management, Guusto



TRACKING CADENCE

WHEN	CHECK	ACTION
Day 1	Delivery and first claims	Fix bounced emails or wrong numbers
Day 3-5	Claim rate by site or team	Ask leaders at low sites to mention it on shift
Week 2	Who hasn't claimed	Send a friendly nudge
Week 6	Redemption rate	Final nudge; print links for holdouts
Claim end	Value returned	Report it and roll it into January

NUDGE TEMPLATE

Hi {first_name}, quick reminder that your holiday thank-you is waiting. It takes a minute to pick something you'll enjoy, and you don't need an account. It's available until {claim_end_date}.

MEASURE

Claim and redemption rate

Overall and by site, shift, or team

MEASURE

Value returned

Unclaimed dollars back in your budget

LISTEN

The stories

What people chose and what they said

Year-end reporting, then plan January

When tax season comes around, nobody wants to rebuild the year from receipts and spreadsheets.

TAX SEASON, MADE EASY



Every reward you send through Guusto is logged: who got it, when, why and how much. When payroll or your accountant asks, you can pull a report instead of piecing it together. If you have questions about how gifts are treated where you are, your payroll or tax advisor is the right person to ask.

ONCE THE HOLIDAYS ARE DONE: KEEP RECOGNITION GOING ALL YEAR

The account you set up for the holidays works the rest of the year. Come in, load the people, and send. No heavy setup required.

MILESTONES

Automate birthdays and work anniversaries so nobody is late or missed.

TOP-DOWN RECOGNITION

Give managers a small budget to recognize great work in the moment.

PEER-TO-PEER

Let teammates thank each other, publicly and often.

BEHAVIOR-BASED INCENTIVES

Reward the behaviors that matter: safety, attendance, learning, survey completion, sales goals.



One thing you can do today: know your budget. If you know your budget today, you can get started tomorrow.

Joe Facciolo, Co-Founder and CEO, Guusto



Where the numbers come from

1. Bankrate, "Survey: 43% of Americans Have At Least One Unused Gift Card," Sept 2024.
2. SHRM, 2023–2024 State of the Workplace Report.
3. UKG, Frontline Workforce Global Study (8,200 frontline workers), Jan 2026, and More Perspectives from the Frontline Workforce, Oct 2025.
4. Robert Half, "Nearly 4 in 10 Professionals Plan to Search for a New Job in 2026," Dec 2025.
5. Gallup, "Employee Recognition: Low Cost, High Impact," 2016.
6. Gallup, "Frontline Workers Want Flexibility Too," Dec 2023.
7. Microsoft WorkLab, "Technology Can Help Unlock a New Future for Frontline Workers," Jan 2022.
8. National Retail Federation, "Gift cards gain popularity as top choice for holiday shoppers in 2025," Dec 2025.
9. Stanford GSB Insights, "Give Them the Gift They're Expecting," on Flynn and Gino, Journal of Experimental Social Psychology.
10. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS).

Podcast quotes are from HR on the Frontline, Guusto's podcast on the WRKdefined network. Quotes from Joe Facciolo, Kwesi Thomas, and Cameron Waind are from the End of Year Recognition Gap recording, excerpted and lightly edited for clarity. This playbook is general information, not legal or tax advice.



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GUUSTO EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION

Skip the sales pitch
Book a no-pressure fit check

[Book a fit check](#)

