



Brandon Hall Group  
**EXCELLENCE  
AT WORK**

# Executive Interview

with **Eric Watkins,**  
President  
Abstrakt Marketing Group

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The Importance of Employee Recognition

## About Abstrakt Marketing Group

Based in St. Louis, Missouri, [Abstrakt Marketing Group](#) is a B2B lead generation company and business growth agency. It offers multi-channel marketing solutions to small- and medium-sized businesses that are looking to grow. Its proven, effective pipeline services and passionate team members have played a key role in its growth over the past 10 years.

## Recognition

Abstrakt Marketing Group won a Silver Brandon Hall Group HCM Excellence Award in 2022.

### EXCELLENCE IN HCM AWARDS



Talent Acquisition

1 Silver Award

## About Eric Watkins



**Eric Watkins** started at Abstrakt Marketing Group in 2012 as an unpaid Operations Intern. In just nine short years, Eric has gone from an intern to holding a position on the Executive team. Today, he oversees the entire company as the President of Abstrakt Marketing Group. While each role that Eric has held throughout his tenure at Abstrakt has been vital, his role in the restructuring of the Partner Sales division was one of the biggest highlights. He enabled Abstrakt to grow immensely in a sustainable manner with the employee count increasing by 140%. In 2018, Eric Watkins earned *Workforce Magazine's* Game Changer award for his contributions to Abstrakt's culture and in 2022 he was one of St. Louis' 100 Titans. As the company grows in revenue, leaders such as Eric ensure that its culture also progresses. While it's true that Eric has already accomplished many impressive feats right after hitting the age of 30, his career is just getting started.



## About Rachel Cooke

**Rachel Cooke** is Brandon Hall Group's Chief Operating Officer and Principal HCM Analyst. She is responsible for business operations, including client and member advisory services, marketing design, annual awards programs, conferences and the company's project management functions. She also leads Advancing Women in the Workplace and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives, research and events. Rachel worked in the HCM research industry for 20+ years and held several key management and executive positions within the Talent and Learning Research, and Performance Improvement industries.

### Q RACHEL

How do you balance having people recognize others and ensuring the recognition is genuine?

### A ERIC

As a business leader, you can get caught up in the day-to-day very easily. You're looking at profit, revenue and processes, and clients and their experiences. It can easily get lost that you have people coming in, working really hard every day and looking to achieve something. That is why recognition is so important. What we crave is to be important, to be unique and to have a purpose. It's the number-one reason social media has taken off. Everybody wants to show how important and unique their lives are. I don't think there's any difference when it comes to work.

The employee is sort of like the gasoline you pour on the fire. The fire is the employee's desire to achieve and be great. You can survive as a business without recognition, but this is what takes it to the next level. Say you're sitting at the top of the business and want to develop a culture of recognition: "I want it to be organic; I don't want to make people do this." But in the beginning, you need to manufacture it and set up systems to consistently recognize your people. If you're doing that from the top down in a company, it will naturally create more recognition throughout the organization.

I suggest you have yearly-quarterly-monthly-weekly-daily recognition. Maybe it's an end-of-the-year event for people who hit certain numbers. A lot of companies do what we call our quarterly vision meeting. That's when we recognize employee tenure — incredible achievements such as 10 years. Our monthly awards celebrate what our teams did throughout the month. Weekly, we do it by team and daily, we encourage employees through different channels. The most important thing is to set up your structure; the baseline for your organization is at least to do this. From there, it starts to take off organically with a life of its own.

### Q RACHEL

How long have you had this in your culture?

### A ERIC

We've had a company meeting where we recognize our employees every month since I've been here. What's interesting is we didn't understand the gravity of this until COVID hit. When a lot of employees started to work remotely, we had to find out how to maintain that cohesion, benefit and enthusiasm of being around one another. The way to do that was not only collaboration but recognition. It's an art within a science. That box was always the same, but how you go about creating it would change.

*(continued)*

We would always have monthly awards by departments but each department might name their award something different or have a unique name that ties in with their team theme. The awards or the criteria may be different for why they picked a person each month, but the framework stays the same of having certain awards and things get celebrated every single month.

**Q** **RACHEL**

How are your award winners selected? Is it company-wide or through specific leaders?

**A** **ERIC**

I wish we had a standard way of doing it; it's all over the board. This is where the organic part comes in because if you're going to recognize somebody in a department, the whole department should be pleased that person is recognized. In some situations, it's the leader who is best suited to make that selection. In other situations, such as our Operations department where it's taken on a life of its own, every Friday there's a toast of the week where everybody grabs a drink and celebrates the week. They all get out their phones and they have this survey where you can nominate people and

they select someone based on the values of our company and who displays those values the best. People should know how you select someone for recognition so you don't have favoritism and the award still has credibility.

**Q** **RACHEL**

What are the different types of recognition?

**A** **ERIC**

Celebration is more fleeting and in the moment. When you recognize someone, a couple of things must happen within that feedback. A lot of people know how to recognize someone based on a result they achieved but most times they're missing two key elements. There's the why — why is important to sell for \$15,000? The answer would be the ultimate impact we have on our clients and community. Then there's the how. When you share the how, you're training your team members as well. New team members who are seeing these kudos can realize this person got recognized for this and this is how they did that; "maybe I should do that as well." Recognition adds a little more substance; celebration is more of a short-term, immediate boosting of energy.

**Q** **RACHEL**

Was there a point where you could see a change in engagement or performance?

**Q** **RACHEL**

What is one takeaway that was a good lesson for you?

**A** **ERIC**

During COVID, our monthly meetings weren't the same; we weren't all gathered together in one room. They were on Zoom, which is better than nothing. One thing we implemented is two channels in Teams or Slack. One was A-player accolades because our values tie to A-players. The other one was client success stories. In the beginning, we made it mandatory. Every manager had to shout out one of their people weekly and every account manager had to share a client success story monthly. As we started this, it was one of those things like "well, this is forced and isn't organic." The only reason it wouldn't be organic is if you don't make it organic and your feedback and shout-outs aren't genuine. That mandate lasts for a little bit, then you hit this point where it's like the diffusion of innovation graph where everybody jumps on board and it takes on a life of its own. You can go on channels and see six shout-outs today of people who are doing well. Our employees are interacting and engaging with it, and our employee turnover and client retention have improved.

**A** **ERIC**

When I started as a sales manager, I hadn't done the job before so I wasn't very good at the technical aspect. For me to be good, I had to really motivate and inspire my people. One thing that helped me is I looked at all of my people as if there was a phone battery display over their heads every single day. People have things going on in their lives; sometimes they're coming in at a 34 and sometimes they're at 99. Before I could help my employees, I had to help myself. I had to have my battery fully charged; what did I need to do to get in the right mindset? If I did that as a leader, almost everything else would take care of itself if I had the right people.

There's no better way to increase people's enthusiasm to do the work than recognition. Ultimately, it hits all the points that motivate the employee — the importance of their work, their purpose and the mastery of the work they're doing every day. What I would take away is that instead of an afterthought, I would put recognition first and figure out how to consistently recognize your employees. If your employees are engaged, that's going to radiate throughout every part of your business.

Q

**RACHEL**

What is your approach to preventing “quiet quitting”?

A

**ERIC**

Quiet quitting has always been going on, but the root of why an employee would quietly quit is because they feel like no one would know the difference. That means someone is not connected to the employee and not appreciating the work they’re doing daily. You can’t give good recognition without being connected to your people or it comes off as disingenuous. I’m a big believer in servant leadership; it’s our job as leaders to remove obstacles and create an environment for teams to be successful. If I’m not doing that, they should quietly quit. They should go somewhere else and find a better leader to work for. If I recognize the importance of their work and what they’re doing, maybe a small percentage will quietly quit. But I’m not going to focus on that because the majority of my employee base is going to be engaged. It’s within our control.

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



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# About Brandon Hall Group

With more than 10,000 clients globally and 28 years of delivering world-class research and advisory services, Brandon Hall Group is focused on developing research that drives performance in emerging and large organizations, and provides strategic insights for executives and practitioners responsible for growth and business results.

## Professional Certifications

Self-paced certification programs. Virtual group sessions for companies. In-person conferences and summits.

## Membership

Individual and Enterprise Membership Options: Includes research assets, advisory support, a client success plan and more.

## Advisory Offerings

Custom Research Projects, including surveys, focus group interviews and Organization Needs Assessment for Transformation, Technology Selection and Strategy.

## Excellence Awards

Two annual programs recognize the best organizations that have successfully deployed programs to achieve measurable results.

SOME WAYS WE CAN HELP

### ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

recognizes world-class HCM programs that transform their organization and achieve breakthrough results. This designation is the next step beyond the HCM Excellence Awards, which focus on a single program, and looks at the department as a whole.

### SMARTCHOICE® PREFERRED PROVIDER PROGRAM

uniquely places HCM service and technology companies at the top of organizations' consideration list of vendors. It adds an unmatched level of credibility based on BHG's twenty-eight-plus years of experience in evaluating and selecting the best solution providers for leading organizations around the world.