Incentive Research Foundation



IMPACT OF INCENTIVES ON TRAINING, LEARNING AND CERTIFICATION

Introduction

This study explores the effects of non-cash tangible rewards and recognition on incentivizing the completion of workplace training and certification programs, and the use and retention of the resulting learning. The findings in this report are based on a survey of 608 workers in the United States and Canada, and an extensive review of past research related to the topic.

The results point to two clear directions and four practical insights that can aid in designing more effective incentives related to workplace training. Workers gave a clear message: make the reward useful and offer a worthwhile reason to finish a course or learning program. When they weighed competing six-week training offers, reward type mattered most, followed by how the reward was earned and how soon it arrived.

That finding comes from the study's conjoint analysis, which asked employees to choose between hypothetical programs with different combinations of incentive features. This gives designers a practical order for making decisions: choose an appealing reward, decide how it is earned, and make delivery dependable.

The 589 written comments we received in the survey illustrate those choices. Small rewards can feel either encouraging or insignificant depending on the recipient and the context. Recognition can feel appreciative or intrusive. A course can be attractive and still be de-prioritized by employees in favor of workload demands. Good design begins with understanding the people expected to take part.

Key Insights

1. **Make the reward worth the effort.** Give employees a concrete reward they can picture using. Respondents were told that a list of possible tangible rewards were of equal value. Gift cards led the tangible reward ranking, with 50% placing them first. Travel followed at 30%. In the conjoint comparisons, tangible rewards were strongly preferred to pure recognition, particularly public announcements. Note that the preference for gift cards rises steadily with age, from 40% of workers under 35 to 62% of those 45 and over, while interest in travel rewards moves in the opposite direction. A reward that appeals to one group may not appeal to another.

2. **Keep a worthwhile finishing goal.** At equal total reward value, 42% preferred one larger completion reward, while 38% preferred progress rewards plus a larger completion reward. Consider using milestones to encourage progress while reserving part of the reward to keep the end goal attractive.

3. **Put later learning into the plan.** When the question included using and retaining the learning from workplace training programs, 46% preferred progress rewards plus a larger reward for demonstrating learning later. If you reserve rewards for demonstrating use and retention, communicate that so participants know what they are working toward.

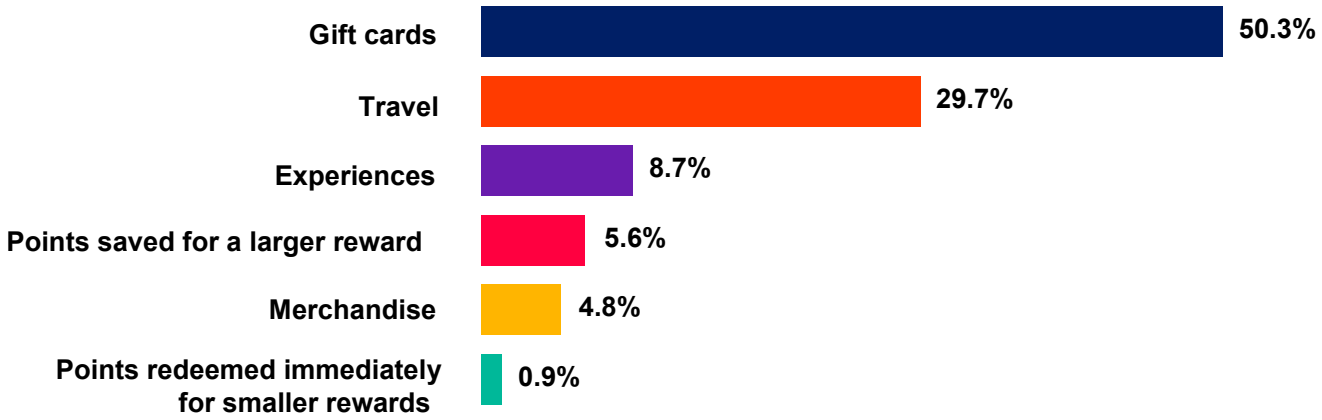
4. **Make room in the working day.** For required training, 45% chose a small tangible reward as the most likely way to encourage earlier completion. Another 20% said workload determined their timing regardless of reward. Ask managers when people can realistically learn, and reserve dedicated time during the workday if possible.

These findings offer designers specific choices to act on. The next pages connect the survey and results with respondent accounts, practical examples, and a plan for measuring what changes.

Choose rewards people can use

Gift cards were the first choice of half the respondents when asked what would motivate them to sign up for optional training. Travel came next at nearly 30%. Both stood well ahead of the other tangible options, even with the dollar value of all reward options held equal.

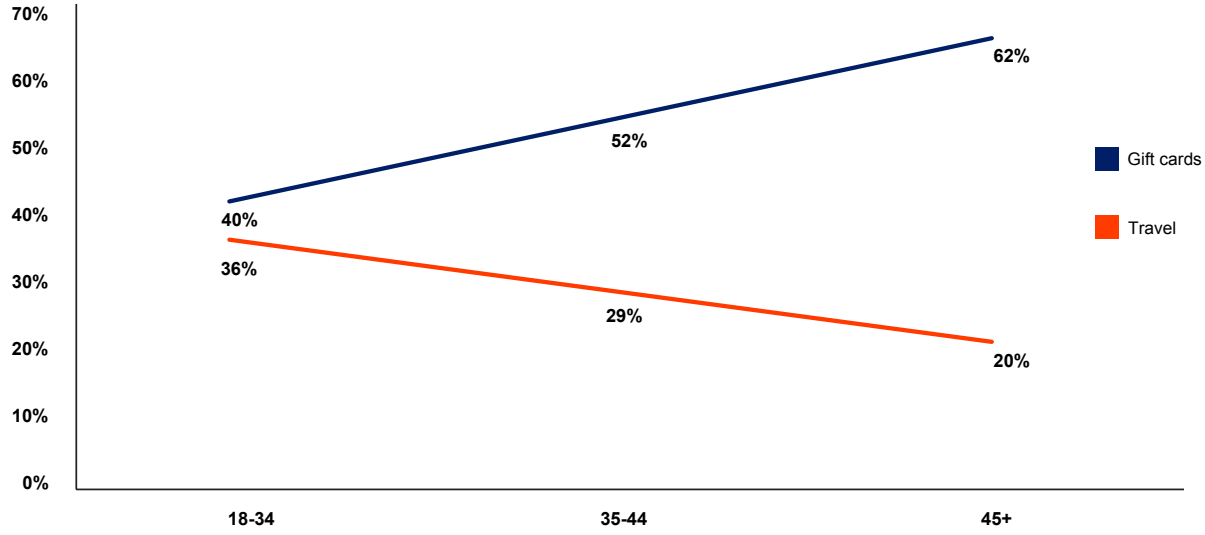
Figure 1: Gift cards led the tangible reward ranking



Share ranking each reward first for optional training. Equal dollar value; n = 539. Source: IRF worker survey, September 2026. Rounding may affect totals. Cash was not offered as an option.

Q7. Imagine your employer offered a reward for completing an optional training program on your own initiative. Assume all options are of equal dollar value.

Figure 2: Age changes reward appeal



Q7. Imagine your employer offered a reward for completing an optional training program on your own initiative. Assume all options are of equal dollar value.

Both trends hold up statistically. If your learners skew young, a travel or experience reward may garner more motivation than its price suggests, but if they skew older, the gift card is not the unimaginative choice it might look like; it is what many in that group wants most.

Ask what makes the reward worthwhile

The comments help explain why reward value means more than the price of those rewards alone. Some respondents pictured small rewards as items they would not use. Others felt that one larger reward would better mark an accomplishment. One respondent put the concern this way:

> *"Smaller rewards feel like they'd be cheaper even though the overall value is the same as the large reward"*

Equal price does not guarantee equal appeal. Before offering rewards, show participants the actual options and ask which they would use. Where feasible, offer a choice. A reward feels more concrete when employees can picture the purchase, trip, or experience they are working toward.

Make career recognition credible

In a separate ranking of recognition without tangible reward, 71% put promotion consideration or new assignments first. Leaders should make that career connection visible. For example, a course invitation could explain how the skill prepares someone for an available project assignment. Be specific about the opportunity and the criteria for consideration.

Badges and credentials were the most reported reward in training that respondents had completed recently (narrowly ahead of gift cards). Give them a clear role: explain what the credential demonstrates, who will recognize it, and where the employee can use it.

Type, timing, and size matter

Reward rankings convey what people like. Conjoint analysis shows how they weigh features together when choosing a more realistic offer. Each respondent compared four pairs of hypothetical incentive programs for a six-week course, with the same total reward value stated in each pair. Across 539 respondents, that produced 2,156 choices.

The offers varied reward type, how the reward was earned and how soon it arrived. The analysis then estimated preference between otherwise identical programs, changing one feature at a time.

Figure 3: The reward and the finishing goal carry the most weight



Share ranking each reward first, by age. Equal dollar value; n = 539. Source: IRF worker survey, September 2026.

Q11–Q14. Which program would make you more likely to enroll in and complete the 6-week course?
The total reward value is the same in both. Model-estimated choice between otherwise identical programs.
Three separate hypothetical comparisons; not observed enrollment or completion.

Use the findings in the order you design the program

Start with the reward. The strongest preference was for tangible points or merchandise over a public announcement. Then decide how people earn it: one completion reward was strongly preferred to dividing the entire reward into milestones. Immediate delivery also appealed, although the size of that preference varied more across analyses.

For a six-week course, an offer could name the tangible reward, spell out what completion requires and promise a delivery date the individual or team can meet. Those details give employees a concrete proposition to consider.

The next question is whether to add progress rewards. The conjoint compared a larger completion reward with milestones alone; it shows substantial interest in combining progress rewards with a larger final reward. Together, these findings identify two useful designs to compare at the same total value.

1. **Offer one large reward on course completion:** This option was clearly favored over a series of small, and potentially less useful or meaningful milestone rewards

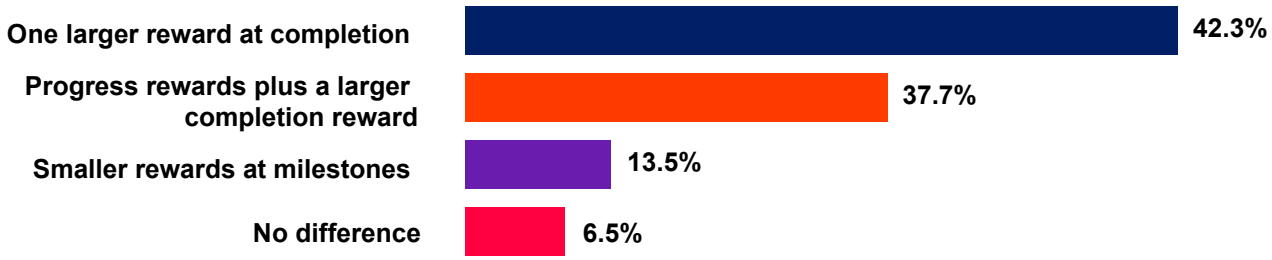
2. **Offer milestone rewards *and* a larger completion reward.** Potentially even better, milestone rewards might be offered along the way, but reduced in value so that a meaningful larger reward can be reserved for completion. In this design, milestone rewards might even permit conversion to a larger reward at the end. One respondent said: “I like the milestones if I can redeem for a larger end reward.” This respondent pictured collecting gift cards toward one larger purchase but points rewards that workers can accumulate — though rated lower than gift cards — might better deliver what many respondents said they want.

The trade-offs hold everywhere in the survey. Tangible rewards beat pure recognition, and a single larger reward beats milestones. This is true among younger and older workers, among women and men, and at every career stage. What changes between groups is which reward people want and what is getting in their way, not how they balance one design feature against another. The survey results clearly suggest that rewarding a skill someone demonstrates 60 to 90 days later gives them a new goal but making someone wait 30 days for a reward they have already earned invites resentment. Keep earning and delivery separate in your own thinking.

Give people a reason to finish

A reward budget can serve two purposes: it can encourage people to keep making progress in a training or certification program and it can give them something worthwhile to finish for. Again, the survey found substantial support for offering one larger completion reward, but also for a combination of progress rewards plus a larger final reward. Milestones alone attracted much less interest.

Figure 4: Most chose a design with a larger completion reward



Preferred reward schedule for a multiweek program. Equal total reward value; n = 539. Source: IRF worker survey, September 2026

Q15. For a multi-week training program, which reward structure would keep you more engaged, assuming equal total value?

The comments distinguish two needs: encouragement to keep going and a reason to reach the end. A respondent who preferred a combination described the first of these:

> *"Even though the total value in the end is equal, knowing I'm being rewarded on each milestone keeps me motivated on moving forward to completion."*

Choose milestones that mark real progress: completing a practice exercise or a module, mastering a step or producing a useful piece of work. Keep the rules easy to explain. The comments show why this matters: some people welcome frequent encouragement, while others want a simpler route to the final reward.

Men and women split in this case as well. Just under half of men (48%) wanted one larger reward at completion, against 36% of women; women were more likely to want the combination or the milestones. If a single design must serve a mixed group, the combination structure works acceptably for both.

The conjoint questions (Figure 3 above) and the reward schedule question (Figure 4 above) point in the same direction: keep the finishing goal attractive. The schedule question adds a useful option for designers by showing how much interest there is in combining that final reward with encouragement along the way.

Run a simple comparison group

For a six-week course, designers could treat two groups slightly differently. They could offer one reward at completion for the first group, and smaller rewards for selected milestones plus a larger reward at the end for the other. Total reward value, training content and feedback mechanisms would be identical for both groups. Leaders would compare completion and dropout rates in each, then check what participants remember and use later.

Make recognition personal and dependable

Recognition can acknowledge progress, show appreciation, and make an accomplishment visible. The right form depends partly on the person. Asked how they generally prefer to be recognized, 44.9% chose private recognition, 33.8% public recognition and 21.3% had no preference.

Even workers who generally preferred public recognition favored tangible rewards in the conjoint comparison (when it was one or the other). For a designer, that raises a useful possibility: offer a tangible reward and personalize the way the achievement is acknowledged.

Separate appreciation from public attention

One respondent explained why rewards along the way were encouraging:

> *"It feels like I'm doing something right and I'm appreciated. Also, it's a good way to motivate me to continue."*

Another described a different reaction:

> *"I don't need continued recognition for completing small steps of a program because I don't need to have that much attention called to myself."*

Ask workers how they want to be recognized but expect that some, out of humility, may say they don't want team or public recognition even though they may appreciate (and deserve) it. A manager might recognize them privately first, "you completed a tough course in which you showed that you can handle an irate customer's objection without losing your bearings or control of the conversation. Do you mind if I use this example in our next team meeting?"

When points become a reason to compete

"At my work our training systems gives us points that literally do nothing, but everyone still competes to have the most."

In this account, colleagues competed for points that the respondent viewed as having no practical value. Points had become something to compare; a status symbol. If your program uses a leaderboard, ask participants what makes it appealing: seeing their own progress, comparing with peers and gaining recognition, or earning a redeemable reward. Their answers can help shape the next design and your communications.

Deliver what you promise

A few comments raised confidence in receiving the reward. One person said smaller rewards along the way would make the final promise of a larger reward more believable. In your communications, state clearly what earns the reward, who delivers it, and when it will arrive.

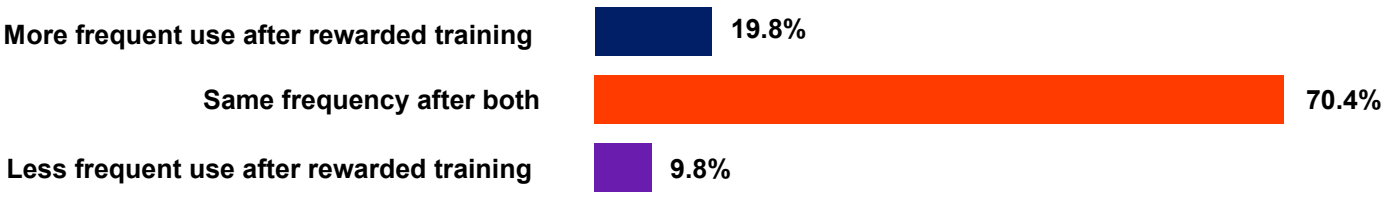
Make delivery part of the promise. "Complete the course and your reward will be available immediately" is easier for people to act on than an unexplained wait. Use a delivery date the program can reliably meet and tell participants how to claim what they have earned.

An experiment in academia offers another reason to make rewards prompt. Participants read a book excerpt for payment and expected an additional bonus either within an hour or a month later. They then chose between two more minutes of reading and a different task, with no additional bonus available. Among those expecting the earlier bonus, 73% continued reading, compared with 55% in the delayed group. This was a statistically significant difference in a brief paid experiment.[1] It gives designers a reason to test whether prompt rewards help sustain interest after the rewarded activity ends.

Extend the value of learning beyond completion

Each respondent answered two questions about how often they used learning at work a month or more after training: one about a course that offered a reward and one about a course that did not. Figure 5 compares the two answers for each of the 398 people who could answer both.

Figure 5: How did use of learning compare after rewarded and unrewarded training?



Comparison of both answers from 398 respondents, reporting use a month or more after two different courses. Source: IRF worker survey, September 2026.

Q18. Thinking of the most recent training you completed where a reward WAS offered: how often did you use or apply what you learned in your job a month or more after you completed the training?
Q19. And thinking of a recent training you completed where NO reward was offered: how often did you use or apply what you learned in your job a month or more after you completed the training?

Most respondents reported the same frequency of use after both courses, but about twice as many reported greater use after rewarded training as reported less. Nearly one in five reported more frequent use after training that offered a reward in general, compared with about one in ten reporting less use. Seven in ten reported the same frequency. The average difference was small, but statistically significant, and additional checks found the same general pattern. This suggests an encouraging association between rewards and applying learning on the job.

It is also important to note that the reward in this case was not necessarily a delayed reward for demonstrating use of learning at some interval after the training. It is likely that a delayed reward contingent on demonstrated use would yield more demonstration of use. Note, however, that this is different from demonstrating that rewards improve retained knowledge or skills. Designers should measure both: what people can still do at an interval after training, and how they use it on the job.

Laboratory experiments provide further reason to investigate the impact of incentives on learning retention. In one experiment, praise after practicing a simple motor skill led to greater improvement on a surprise test 24 hours later.[2] In another study, gains from motor training with monetary rewards were retained 30 days later, when tests no longer offered rewards.[3] A later motor-task study produced mixed results.[4] Together, they suggest rewards can support lasting skill learning under some conditions. The next step is to test whether those benefits carry over to workplace programs.

One respondent who expected to complete training anyway distinguished reward motivation from the anticipated value of learning:

> *"The reward would be a good incentive to motivate me, but I also know that the training would help make the job easier."*

Make that connection explicit in the invitation: explain which part of the job the learning is intended to make easier.

Reward the use of learning after the course

Tell participants what they will demonstrate, when they will demonstrate it and how success will be assessed. This gives learning after the course a place in the reward design from the start.

When asked about completing training, using it at work and trying to retain it, 46% preferred progress rewards plus a larger reward for demonstrating learning later. Only 18% preferred a reward for demonstrating skill or knowledge 60–90 days later. These preferences make rewards for later demonstration a promising design to test, most likely with smaller rewards for making progress in and completing the training.

An illustrative learning event program

Consider a conference workshop that teaches managers how to give employees useful performance feedback. Before the event, explain the skills participants should learn, how they can practice and what would qualify for a later reward.

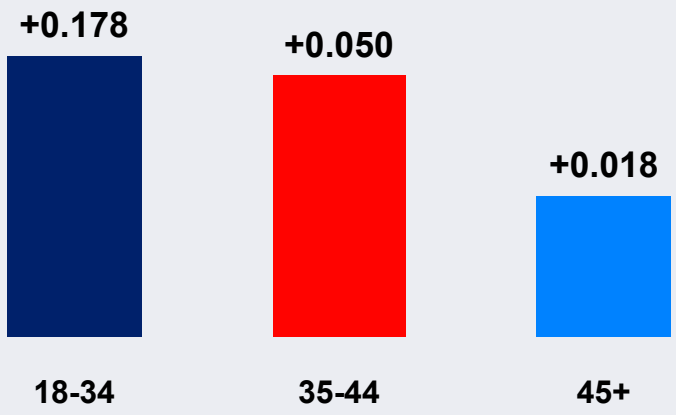
After the workshop, provide a realistic practice opportunity. At 60–90 days, participants could demonstrate a skill in a short scenario, for example, a 1:1 to discuss a missed deadline, then ask what got in the way and agree on a next step. Assess each of these behaviors against clear criteria. Where their jobs provide a suitable opportunity, documented workplace use could supply additional evidence. Make the later reward depend on the announced criteria.

The practical opportunity is to give employees a reason to return to the material, practice it, and show what they can do. Plan the reward, and the opportunity to practice, together.

To test the design, consider forming two groups incentivized with the same total reward. Use the same training and give both groups an opportunity to practice. One group receives progress and completion rewards only. The other gets part of the reward deferred until after completion, contingent on using the learning. Assess both groups against the same criteria.

Rewards may motivate younger workers (in particular) to use what they learned

A crosscut of the survey data on age suggests that only workers under 35 used the learning more after a rewarded course.



Difference in reported use of learning after a rewarded course versus an unrewarded one, by age. n = 413. Source: IRF worker survey, September 2026.

For workers 35 and over the difference is indistinguishable from zero. In other words, rewarded training is associated with more use among workers under 35, but shows no such association among older workers.

Keep participation and learning measures separate

A reward can also give people a reason to try a learning program or platform. Among the 263 respondents who said a reward prompted them to start a training or certification program, 76% reported continuing the program after the rewards ended. Rewards also reach people who are already willing to learn. Among 428 respondents answering a survey question about recent rewarded training, 80% said they definitely or probably would have completed the training without the incentive.

Decide whether your program aims to attract additional learners, encourage persistence, recognize achievement, or support later use, and measure that purpose.

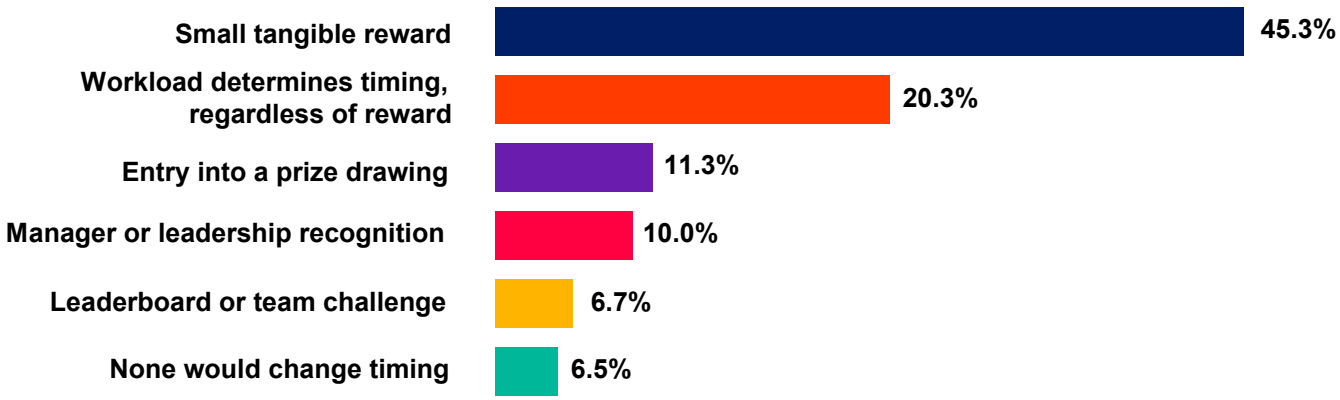
The remaining answers deserve attention too: 16% said they probably or definitely would not have completed the training without the incentive, and 4% were unsure. Those responses suggest a useful question for deeper investigation: which employees does the reward help bring into and complete learning?

Compare enrollment and completion across everyone invited, so that the results include the people who would otherwise have stayed away. Define success before launch: more people starting, more finishing, stronger knowledge later, or better use on the job. A reward can serve more than one purpose, but each purpose needs its own measure.

Make time for required learning

Before increasing the reward to encourage participation, check the workload. A small tangible reward was the most popular proposed way to encourage earlier completion of required training. Yet one in five respondents said work priorities determined their timing regardless of the incentive.

Figure 6: A small reward works but workload still matters



Stated motivators for earlier completion; n = 479 with confirmed mandatory-training experience and an applicable answer.
Source: IRF worker survey, September 2026. Rounding may affect totals.

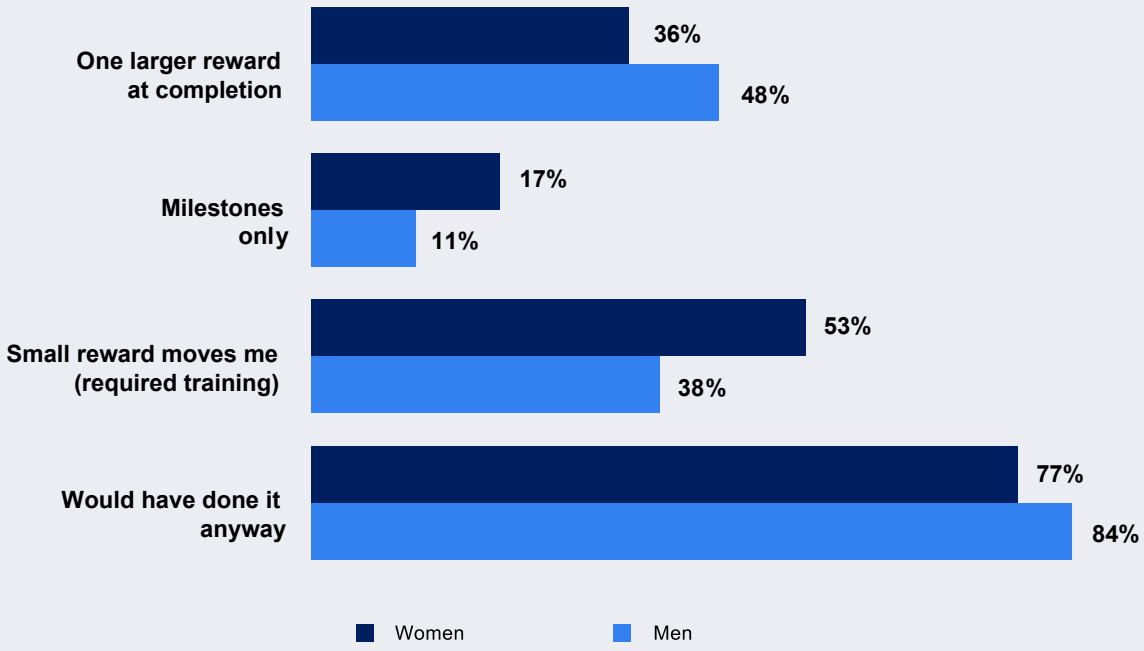
Q22. For required or compliance training (e.g., safety, ethics, security), which one of the following would most likely get you to complete it before the deadline?

Among 481 respondents answering the related engagement question, 55% said they were less engaged when completing required training at the last minute. This makes small rewards that are useful for overcoming procrastination particularly appealing.

Track when people finish, then check whether they have absorbed and can use the training material. An early completion target is more useful when it is connected to a learning goal.

Who the small reward reaches

The appetite for a small reward is not spread evenly, and neither is the workload problem.



Selected differences between women (n = 248) and men (n = 284). Source: IRF worker survey, September 2026.

Q11–Q14. Which program would make you more likely to enroll in and complete the 6-week course?
The total reward value is the same in both. Model-estimated choice between otherwise identical programs.
Three separate hypothetical comparisons; not observed enrollment or completion.

Women were markedly more likely to say a small tangible reward would get them to finish earlier: 53% against 38% of men. Men were more likely to say their workload decided it regardless (24% against 17%). The same pattern shows up in who the incentive influences: 77% of women said they would have completed a recent rewarded training anyway, against 84% of men. On these numbers a reward budget buys roughly a third more incremental participation among the women in this sample than among the men.

Age is similar. The share saying workload decides their timing rises from 14% of under-35s to around a quarter of workers 35 and over. Older workers are also far more likely to say the reward schedule makes no difference to them at all: 14% of the 45-and-over group, against 3% of under-35s.

Friday afternoons for learning

One respondent described a manager who encouraged employees to use Friday afternoons for courses, including optional courses. The company paid for that time. The respondent explained why this mattered:

> *"This helps me upskill, add it to my CV and LinkedIn, and the company pays for the time so it is a win-win for me."*

Ask managers to identify a realistic place for learning in the working week. A protected hour or a manageable sequence of sessions is a concrete option to try alongside any incentive. Compare whether the reward, the available time, or both help people complete earlier and learn more.

Try a small program and measure what changes

Start with a course or event that matters to the business. Choose the behavior you want to improve, then use the findings to design two credible offers. A useful first test is one tangible completion reward versus the same total value split between progress and completion.

Choose the comparison before launch. To test when rewards are earned or how quickly they arrive after being earned, keep total value and training conditions comparable. To test the added benefit of an incentive, include a control group receiving the usual program without the reward. Where feasible, assign eligible employees to groups by chance before invitations go out. If fairness is a concern, provide the control group with equivalent rewards after the experiment.

Count everyone offered the program. Include those who typically never enroll and those who leave early. Comparing only completers can hide the people a design fails to reach. If groups cannot be assigned by chance, record their starting differences and be cautious about attributing later differences to the incentive.

A practical pilot could extend a course beyond the completion date. Give every learner the same short follow-up: recall one key idea a week later, then apply it to a realistic work problem and receive feedback. Randomly offer a small reward to some learners for completing this follow-up. Compare participation, later recall, and the quality of application with the group receiving the same activities without the reward. This would show whether the incentive adds value beyond the learning activity itself.

Measure the result that matters

Question	What to record	When
Did more people join and finish?	Enrollment among everyone invited; completion, dropout and completion dates	During recruitment and the program
What do people still know?	A brief objective knowledge check or skill assessment	At completion and 30–90 days later
Are they using the learning?	A relevant skill demonstration or documented work use; employee reports as supporting evidence	After a realistic opportunity to practice, often 60–90 days
What did the result cost?	Rewards, staff time, reminders and follow-up; cost relative to the comparison group	Across the full program and follow-up

Ask what helped or got in the way. Brief comments can reveal whether the reward was useful, the rules were clear, delivery was dependable and employees had time to learn. Ask about appreciation and pressure as well as enjoyment. Use the answers to improve the next version.

Decide what justifies expansion. Set the main outcome, follow-up period and decision rule in advance. If completion rises but later learning changes little, revisit what earns the reward and how employees practice. If the program improves the outcome that matters at an acceptable cost, use that evidence to decide how far to expand it.

The evidence points to age, not stage

We asked survey takers to place themselves by career stage: early, growth, established, later, or in transition. The intention was to get at life stage without the usual generational labels, which may flatten real differences into convenient categories.

The methodology was effective, nearly every respondent completed the question and the distribution made sense. However, on incentive preferences, there was not much separation. Workers in the growth stage and the established stage — the two largest groups by far — look very much alike. Promotion ranks first for both. Both prefer tangible rewards to recognition by similar margins. Both report similar workload constraints.

Age, meanwhile, produced the strongest and most reliable differences in the study.

This has a practical implication. If you are considering designing learning incentives around career stage, this survey provides no evidence to support it. The simpler approach, based on age, is supported with two caveats: the early and later-stage groups were small in the sample, so real differences at the edges could be hidden, and stage and age are correlated to begin with. But between the two, age is the one where the real differences in reward preference were seen in this survey.

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These research results should give incentive and reward designers additional considerations when using non-cash rewards to encourage workplace learning. The comments identify questions that this research partially addresses and are worth pursuing further: What makes a reward useful to encourage participation, use, and retention in workplace training? When is feedback enough, how does reward delivery build trust, and how does offering designated time to learn change participation?

About this research

The IRF examined how noncash incentives (cash was not included) could make workplace learning more appealing and how workers described their learning experiences. The study combines reward rankings, a conjoint choice experiment, experience questions and written explanations.

Who participated and what they answered

The survey collected 608 responses through Prolific on September 3, 9 and 10, 2026. Four versions of the survey used the same core questions and different pairs of six-week training offers. Each eligible respondent made four conjoint choices, producing 2,156 choices. Reward-type and structure preferences changed little in sensitivity checks; the strength of the delivery-timing preference varied more. Appendices D and E give the models and design.

How the comments were used

All 589 nonblank explanations of reward-schedule choices were read and coded; 520 came from eligible respondents and form the primary qualitative analysis. AI-assisted coding and review distinguished 24 overlapping meanings.

Reading the findings

This was an unweighted online panel, not a representative workforce sample. Preferences concern the options presented; the conjoint predicts choice among hypothetical offers. It compared tangible points or merchandise with public announcements and completion rewards with milestones alone. Separate questions covered gift cards, private recognition, combined schedules and later demonstrations. They should not be read as identical comparisons. The later-demonstration question did not explicitly equalize reward value.

Experience questions describe recalled behavior. The application comparison concerns different courses and does not establish that rewards caused the small difference, improved retained knowledge or prolonged use. Reward receipt and comparable follow-up periods were not verified. Platform continuation has no common duration. Mandatory-training responses describe expected motivation and recalled engagement. Experience-based sample sizes vary with applicability.

The laboratory retention studies establish effects in specific tasks. The survey does not identify a minimum reward amount or optimal budget split.

The wider research context

Earlier research connects motivation with choice, capability and social connection.[5] Reviews show that rewards and personal interest relate differently to motivation, performance quality and quantity across settings.[6,7] Supportive work environments are associated with using training on the job, and recognition has improved participation or performance in other settings.[8,9,10] These findings support attention to the learning experience and working conditions alongside the reward. Full references and detailed results can be found in the appendices.

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Survey source

IRF worker survey, September 2026. Four versions of Incentive Effectiveness in Workplace Training, with corresponding response-quality exports. Collected responses: 608. Eligible respondents: 539.

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