



smarter, not harder

Rethinking reward &
recognition in HE & FE

MARCH 19 2026

ECC

VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

Speakers

12

Spotlight Sessions

7

Keynotes

5

Event Highlights

2

Introduction

1

Introduction

Our 2026 virtual Annual Conference attracted more than 170 participants. A virtual event enables colleagues to dip in and out to catch sessions of most interest, and we were delighted that over 95 people were still online at the end of the day. Feedback was very positive, and we are grateful to everyone for participating.

Once again, instead of spending money on delegate packs we made a charitable donation on behalf of each delegate, and were pleased to donate £1,230 to Crisis, Samaritans, and Macmillan Cancer Support.

The event featured superb keynote speakers and practical 'spotlight sessions' on a variety of topics under the Smarter, Not Harder theme. Videos of speaker interviews and session presentations are available on our website, with links provided on the following pages. We've also uploaded keynote and spotlight session videos to the Members' Area of our website.

Finally, a huge thank you from everyone at ECC to all our delegates, speakers and the support staff who made the day a success.

Nicholas Johnston
Chief Executive
ECC



Event Highlights

Attendance:

- 132 ECC Members attended on the day
- Total users: 177

Platform:

- Number of chat messages: 228
- Average time spent on the platform: 3 hours, 33 minutes, 13 seconds
- The lobby had 1,325 clicks throughout the day

Emissions: (if the event was to be held in London)

7502.50 kg/CO₂ saved*

That's the equivalent of:

- Annual electricity usage of 4-5 homes in the UK
- Charging circa 912,000 smartphones
- Around 13,600 takeaway lattes

* CO₂ savings based on delegates who chose to provide a postcode to the virtual platform (optional).



Event Highlights

The conference was a good use of my time.

94% Strongly Agree/ Agree

How would you rate the virtual platform?

100% Excellent/ Good

The conference programme was relevant and engaging.

94% Strongly Agree/ Agree

The booking process was easy.

94% Strongly Agree/ Agree

ECC[®]

ECC[®]



Keynotes

Keynote 1: Smarter Is a Choice. Actionable Strategies, Empowered People, and Smarter Ways of Working That Actually Stick

Christine Armstrong, Researcher, Author, Speaker, Vlogger, Armstrong & Partners Ltd

Thursday 19th March 2026, 09:40 - 10:40

Everyone is being asked to do more with less. Leading to exhaustion, burnout and frustration: and the data shows it. Christine reframed the challenge because success comes not from piling it on, but from making different choices and getting practical about what to stop, start and simplify.

Just like no one sets out to create bad jobs, yet here we are staring at clunky processes, random rotas and great talent leaking out of the sides.

Christine looked at the global evidence for what makes jobs “good” or even “great” and translated it into practical achievable insights for HR professionals wanting to win back time, clarify priorities, sharpen focus and deliver.



Keynote 1 | 09.40 - 10.40 on Thursday 19 March

Smarter Is a Choice. Actionable strategies, empowered people, and smarter ways of working that actually stick



Christine Armstrong.
Researcher, Author, Speaker,
Vlogger, Armstrong & Partners Ltd

19 March 2026

VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

[Christine Armstrong Interview](#)



Keynotes

Keynote 2: High Performance Through Appreciation (motivating the human being behind the employee)

Chris Britton, *Appreciation Expert*

Thursday 19th March 2026, 13:20 - 14:20

What happens when the science of gratitude meets the desires of our employees? Higher productivity, better retention (of the right people), lower absence and a happier workforce.

Seeing the person and not just the employee is fast becoming a must have for organisations.

In this practical session, Chris left delegates knowing:

- Why HR need to tap into the emotional capital of our people.
- The science of appreciation and why it drives productivity.
- Practical actions to reward and recognise people without it costing a fortune.



Keynote 2 | 13.20 - 14.20 on Thursday 19 March

High Performance Through Appreciation (motivating the human being behind the employee)



Chris Britton
Appreciation Expert

19 March 2026

VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

[Chris Britton Interview](#)



Spotlight Sessions

Thursday 19th March 2026, 11:00 - 11:45

Spotlight Session 1 & 4: Brain-Smart Difficult Conversations: The Other Side of Reward and Recognition

Jo Britton, BA (Hons), MBA, Certified Performance Coach (Distinction), Certified Neurosculpting® Facilitator, Certified DiSC practitioner, Director, PACE Development

When we think of reward and recognition, we picture the positives – the thank-yous, bonuses and celebrations. But recognition also lives in the tougher moments: saying no to a pay rise, giving feedback that stings or explaining why someone wasn't chosen for the job.

Jo Britton, Neuroleadership and Neurosculpting® Coach, joined us for a practical, neuroscience-informed session exploring the brain science behind real recognition. We discovered how to approach those awkward and difficult reward and feedback conversations with empathy, fairness and clarity, so people feel valued, even when the message is hard to hear.



Spotlight Session 1 | 11.00 – 11.45 on Thursday 19 March

Brain-Smart Difficult Conversations: The Other Side of Reward and Recognition



Jo Britton, BA (Hons),
MBA, Certified Performance Coach (Distinction), Certified Neurosculpting® Facilitator, Certified DiSC practitioner, Director, PACE Development

19 March 2026

VIRTUAL CONFERENCE



Spotlight Sessions

Thursday 19th March 2026, 11:00 - 11:45

Spotlight Session 2: AI-Enabled Recognition: Keeping Humanity at the Heart

Hayley Bird, Delivery Director and Learning Consultant, Quantum Rise

This session explored how AI tools can help participants give recognition that's more personal, inclusive and timely without losing authenticity. Participants saw how AI can surface employee preferences, prompt recognition moments and coach managers to write more meaningful messages.

But the real challenge is balance: how far should AI go before appreciation stops feeling human? Through short demos, conversation, and reflection, delegates left with clear ideas on how to use AI to support, not substitute, genuine recognition.

In the end, participants:

1. Understood how AI can enhance and not replace human recognition.
2. Recognised ethical and cultural limits of AI driven appreciation.
3. Crafted or refined a recognition message using AI support while keeping it human.



Spotlight Session 2 | 11.00 - 11.45 on Thursday 19 March

AI Enabled Recognition: Keeping Humanity at the Heart



Hayley Bird.
Delivery Director and Learning
Consultant, Quantum Rise

19 March 2026

VIRTUAL CONFERENCE



8



Spotlight Sessions

Thursday 19th March 2026, 11:00 - 11:45

Spotlight Session 3: Is Performance Management Dead? How to Transform your Managers into Performance Enablers

Thomas Goubau, CEO, Q7Leader

In a world defined by volatility, complexity, and rapidly changing skill lifecycles, traditional performance management is no longer fit for purpose. This session explored the evolving role of executives in building a People + Performance organisation — one where leadership, HR strategy, and real-time people insights converge to drive sustainable growth. Participants discovered why employee engagement hinges on fairness, clarity, and continuous management practices, and how outdated, manual HR processes contribute to disengagement and managerial overload.

Through the lens of the People Model Canvas methodology and the DOT Meeting approach, the session demonstrated how one structured, collaborative meeting can transform leadership habits, empower managers, and deliver accurate, auditable people data. Real case studies show how organisations have boosted leadership quality, reduced bias, and saved significant manager time. Executives left with a practical framework to modernise people management and enable performance — not just evaluate it.



Spotlight Session 3 | 11.00 – 11.45 on Thursday 19 March

Is Performance Management Dead? How to Transform your Managers into Performance Enablers



Thomas Goubau,
CEO, Q7Leader

19 March 2026

VIRTUAL CONFERENCE



Spotlight Sessions

Thursday 19th March 2026, 12:25 - 13:10

Spotlight Session 5: Avoiding Pitfalls in Reward: Legal Lessons for HR

Simon Allison, Partner and Jack Boyle, Partner, both of Blackadders

Simon Allison and Jack Boyle, partners in the employment law team at Blackadders LLP, explored common employment law scenarios linked to bonuses and wider reward practices. They offered practical tips and tricks for best practice and for avoiding the types of claims that can arise when reward and recognition arrangements go wrong.



Spotlight Session 5 | 12.15 – 13.00 on Thursday 19 March

Avoiding pitfalls in reward: legal lessons for HR



Simon Allison, Partner, and Jack Boyle, Partner,
both of Blackadders

19 March 2026

VIRTUAL CONFERENCE



10



Spotlight Sessions

Thursday 19th March 2026, 12:25 - 13:10

Spotlight Session 6: Recognition as Nervous System Regulation in HE & FE

Annalie Howling, Keynote Speaker, Author, Performance Coach

In high pressure HE and FE environments, recognition is often treated as a motivational extra. In this talk, Annalie Howling reframed recognition as something far more powerful: a targeted nervous system intervention that directly influences wellbeing, performance, leadership presence, and talent retention.

Drawing on her work with Olympians, England footballers, PGA golfers, ultra-high-net-worth individuals (including billionaires), and senior leadership teams, Annalie brought elite performance psychology into education systems under strain. As a globally published author and renowned trauma specialist, she showed how recognition or its absence biologically signals safety or threat, shaping whether people can think clearly, stay engaged, and remain committed long-term.

This was a rare opportunity to hear how recognition, when applied with precision, becomes one of the most effective tools for stabilising pressure, reducing burnout, and retaining high-calibre talent, without adding cost, complexity, or yet another initiative.



Spotlight Session 6 | 12.15 - 13.00 on Thursday 19 March

Recognition as Nervous System Regulation in HE & FE



Annalie Howling,
Keynote speaker, author,
performance coach

19 March 2026

VIRTUAL CONFERENCE



Speakers



Simon Allison, Partner, Blackadders

Spotlight Session 5: Avoiding Pitfalls in Reward: Legal Lessons for HR

Simon is Head of the Employment Team, specialising in employment law for over 20 years. He gives advice in relation to the full gamut of issues, from recruitment to performance management, right through to TUPE and social media.



Christine Armstrong, Researcher, Author, Speaker, Vlogger, Armstrong & Partners Ltd

Keynote 1: Smarter Is a Choice. Actionable Strategies, Empowered People, and Smarter Ways of Working That Actually Stick

Christine Armstrong studies the world of work. She writes, researches, speaks and vlogs on what the trends and data tell us is and isn't working.

Ranked 6th among the world's top 50 Future of Work influencers and named a Top 50 Workplace Leader 2023, Christine writes regularly for national, international and business media and co-founded Jericho Chambers, an early pioneer of flexible and hybrid working.

Her weekly vlog is watched in more than 20 countries, with over 3 million viewers on topics from AI to burnout. She's also the author of *The Mother of All Jobs* (Bloomsbury).

Christine's sessions blend data, stories and energy to leave audiences informed, energised and ready to rethink how work works.



Speakers



Hayley Bird, Delivery Director and Learning Consultant, Quantum Rise

Spotlight Session 2: AI-Enabled Recognition: Keeping Humanity at the Heart

Hayley Bird is the Co-Founder and Delivery Director of Quantum Rise Talent Group and has over 15 years' experience in education, skills, careers, corporate training and learning and development. She has set up 2 successful digital training companies and continues to thrive on bringing practical, innovative and high impact virtual training into the organisations she works with.

She is an engaging, focused and supportive facilitator who has worked with over 2000+ managers, coaches, tutors, teachers and trainers to really challenge their online training delivery to focus on learner experience and impact.

Hayley works closely with the fantastic Delivery Partner team at Quantum Rise Talent Group with a passion for quality and impact when it comes to delivering excellent training solutions for businesses.



Jack Boyle, Partner, Blackadders

Spotlight Session 5: Avoiding Pitfalls in Reward: Legal Lessons for HR

Jack provides general advice on the full spectrum of employment law issues including employment contracts, restrictive covenants, disciplinary/grievance procedures, unfair dismissal, discrimination, TUPE and settlement agreements. Jack also appears in the Employment Tribunal.



Chris Britton, Appreciation Expert

Keynote 2: High Performance Through Appreciation (motivating the human being behind the employee)

Since 2008, Chris has used an empathy-first approach to drive positive change and high performance in organisations like Virgin, Vodafone, River Island, and Reward Gateway. His passion for seeing people for who they are – not just what they can do – has inspired audiences worldwide. He combines groundbreaking research, personal storytelling, humour, and practical next steps to create an engaging experience helps to unlock the potential of your people and business.



Speakers



Jo Britton, BA (Hons), MBA, Certified Performance Coach (Distinction), Certified Neurosculpting® Facilitator, Certified DiSC practitioner, Director, PACE Development
Spotlight Sessions 1 & 4: Brain-Smart Difficult Conversations: The Other Side of Reward and Recognition

Jo is a trusted coach, confidante and leadership development specialist, working with CEOs, Managing Directors, C-suite executives and leadership teams. She also has a particular passion for helping women advance their careers and thrive in male intensive industries.

She integrates cutting-edge neuroscience into her coaching and training, equipping leaders with practical, brain-based tools to enhance mental agility, emotional regulation and decision-making under pressure. Her neuroscience-informed approach enables clients to rewire limiting patterns, build psychological resilience and achieve sustainable high performance without burning out.



Suzanne Daley, Member Engagement and Reward Consultant, ECC
ECC Online Update

Suzanne has a successful track record of delivering HR solutions at a strategic level both as a Reward specialist and as a consultant.

Suzanne has led a wide range of projects for our members from pay and grading review and HERA and FEDRA implementation projects to equal pay reviews. Suzanne has developed bespoke Pay and Grading structures for a number of members including the Institute for Development Studies and Northampton College, all embedded by FEDRA, our sector leading Job Evaluation tool.

Prior to joining ECC, Suzanne worked as an inhouse Reward specialist, responsible for the full range of Reward issues including pay, core and flexible benefits and pensions.



Speakers



Kiva Falvey, Director of Business Services and Finance, ECC
ECC Online Update

Kiva brings over a decade of expertise in Business Management, Finance, and HR. In this pivotal role, she ensures ECC's financial, legal, procurement, and governance processes run smoothly and remain fully compliant with all internal and external requirements.

Her strategic leadership has played a key role in shaping ECC's internal operations, helping to build a resilient and adaptable organisation behind the scenes.

Before joining ECC, Kiva held senior roles including Planning and Development Business Manager at the London Borough of Brent, and Office Manager at the New Opportunities Fund—positions where she developed a strong foundation in operational strategy and team management.

Kiva successfully led ECC's website re-launch, managing the project from concept through to execution. She continues to oversee the site's content strategy, ensuring it stays fresh, relevant, and aligned with ECC's evolving mission.

Outside of work, Kiva is a passionate traveller making up for lost time. After completing a fear-of-flying course, she's now eagerly exploring new destinations—especially those with plenty of sunshine.



Thomas Goubau, CEO, Q7Leader
Spotlight Session 3: Is Performance Management Dead? How to Transform your Managers into Performance Enablers

Thomas Goubau is a seasoned entrepreneur and CEO of Q7Leader, where he leads the company's mission to transform talent management for B2B SaaS executives. Prior to Q7Leader, he co-founded Aproplan, a construction-tech SaaS platform that scaled rapidly, reaching significant revenue and team growth before merging with GenieBelt to become LetsBuild, where he served as Chief Revenue Officer. Thomas brings deep experience in scaling technology businesses, people-centric leadership, and operational growth. He is active in the HR tech and leadership community and frequently shares insights on organisational performance.



Speakers



Annalie Howling, Keynote Speaker, Author, Performance Coach
Spotlight Session 6: Recognition as Nervous System Regulation in HE & FE

Annalie Howling is a trauma-informed performance coach, EMDR specialist, and globally published author. She works with Olympians, England footballers, PGA golfers, ultra-high-net-worth individuals, and senior leadership teams operating under extreme pressure. Renowned for her work on nervous system regulation and sustainable high performance, Annalie brings elite-level insight into organisational environments, helping leaders and institutions retain talent, reduce burnout, and perform at their best under load.



Nicholas Johnston, Chief Executive, ECC
Welcome to the Conference & Conference Close

As Chief Executive, Nicholas ensures that ECC stays focused on our members, balancing long-term strategic development with a firm commitment to delivering today's needs.

He has direct experience of many aspects of HR and has led ECC through a period of significant growth and expansion over the last 12 years.

Nicholas brings 25 years of experience of developing and delivering practical and successful strategies and business plans in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

Before joining ECC he spent several years as Head of Strategy and Performance at RNIB, a £120m UK membership charity with 3,000 staff across 40 sites. In his spare time, he enjoys travel and walking a dog he always said he didn't want but is now inseparable from.



For more information:

call 020 8369 5131

email contactus@ecc.ac.uk

or visit www.ecc.ac.uk

Follow us on LinkedIn

 <https://www.linkedin.com/company/ecc-ltd/>

Educational Competencies Consortium Ltd

The Brentano Suite, Prospect House, 2 Athenaeum Road,
London, N20 9AE

Tel: +44 (020) 8369 5131

www.ecc.ac.uk



Educational Competencies
Consortium Limited.



smarter, not harder

Rethinking reward &
recognition in HE & FE

MARCH 19 2026

ECC

VIRTUAL CONFERENCE