

The Contribution Recognition Gap

Evidence acknowledgment and organizational allocation

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Conceptual working paper 2 of 5 | Pending empirical validation

Abstract

This paper defines the contribution-recognition gap as a mismatch between defensible evidence about a person's contribution and an organization's expressed acknowledgment of that contribution within a specified episode. It distinguishes underrecognition from a failure to receive a desired reward. The proposed mechanisms include limited evaluator exposure, evidence compression, communication styles, loss of contribution history during adoption, uneven assignment access, and differences in the rules governing recognition and advancement. Because contribution and recognition are distinct constructs with different scales, their subtraction does not produce a validated fairness index. The paper develops a matched-evidence approach, specifies rival interpretations, and proposes longitudinal and experimental tests. Existing research motivates the problem without establishing its prevalence or validating the Corporate Value Triad. The resulting audit focuses on traceable omissions, contestable judgments, and process correction rather than employee labels.

1 What constitutes a gap

A claim of underrecognition contains at least three judgments: the work mattered, the person contributed, and the acknowledgment failed to reflect that contribution. Each judgment can be contested. A well-liked employee's disappointment is not sufficient evidence. Nor is a manager's assertion that a review was fair. The empirical task is to reconstruct relevant evidence and compare it with what the organization actually recorded or communicated.

The unit of analysis is an employee-episode pair within an evaluation window. Contribution C refers to a defensible contribution to role-relevant outcomes, including enabling and preventive work. Recognition N is an observable acknowledgment such as project credit, a performance narrative, a formal award, or an explicit acknowledgment during a decision. Attribution A is the evaluator's credit judgment that may precede N. Reward R refers to a separate allocation such as a pay change or promotion.

A gap can run in either direction. An organization can omit a contributor, overstate a spokesperson's role, or acknowledge work that independent evidence does not support. It can also correctly recognize joint work without determining each person's counterfactual share. The model therefore permits unresolved cases. It does not require an auditor to manufacture a precise answer where evidence is incomplete.

2 Why reward disappointment is a separate question

Consider a fictional engineer who prevents a serious service failure. A review may accurately acknowledge the prevention while a promotion panel selects another person for a role requiring skills the engineer has not demonstrated. That is not necessarily a contribution-recognition gap. Conversely, a salary increase driven by a retention concern can coexist with an inaccurate project narrative. Reward does not establish attribution accuracy.

The normative benchmark must be stated before inspecting individual cases. An organization might promise to recognize enabling work, distribute development access fairly, and select managers against prospective role criteria. Those promises generate different tests. A mismatch between current-role contribution and management promotion is not inherently unjust. Research on promotions and managerial matching underscores the need to distinguish these purposes (Benson et al., 2019 [R07]).

CVT consequently avoids a universal claim that rewards should be proportional to a single contribution score. Organizations must choose and justify their allocation rules. Researchers can test consistency with those stated rules, compare consequences of alternative rules, and examine whether people have access to a meaningful correction process.

3 Proposed mechanisms

The exposure mechanism proposes that some relevant evidence never reaches an evaluator. Preventive work may leave a quieter trace than a customer presentation. Work performed across shifts or organizational boundaries may have no single observer. This is a hypothesis about information, not a general statement about which occupations are undervalued.

The compression mechanism proposes that lengthy work histories become short narratives. A final presenter, project owner, or formally accountable manager can become the convenient subject of a success story. Compression can be efficient, and the named person may have made a substantial contribution. The predicted problem arises when compression suppresses material enabling work or turns responsibility for a project into a false assertion of sole authorship.

The opportunity mechanism concerns who gets work that creates recognizable evidence. Employees may differ in access to consequential assignments before recognition occurs. Babcock et al. (2017 [R06]) examine gender differences in allocation of tasks with low promotability. Their specific findings do not establish a general builder disadvantage, but they motivate measuring assignments and maintenance burdens rather than attributing every outcome to personal communication skill.

The conversion mechanism concerns organizational rules after recognition. A manager can acknowledge work yet lack promotion authority or budget. A vacancy may never open. An employee can decline relocation or a managerial career. Treating these outcomes as evidence of hidden political capture would be an error. The protocol measures eligibility, available opportunities, and employee preferences where consent permits.

Communication styles as a proposed source of unequal visibility

Contribution Signaling distinguishes the explicit description of one's actions from evaluator exposure to that description. Both can vary while relevant work remains comparable. The Collective Attribution Paradox proposes that a team-focused description may leave an individual's role less legible in an individual evaluation system. The comparison must allow a third possibility: a description that acknowledges the team and specifies each person's actions. Collective credit is compatible with precise individual attribution.

The hypothesized disadvantage is conditional. A knowledgeable manager may already know who did what. A strong team-level evaluation system may reward collective framing. Explicit self-attribution can also be inaccurate or counterproductive. Communication may itself help the outcome. These alternatives make manager knowledge, exposure, role, record quality, and productive communication necessary parts of the design. H9 and H10 in the revised protocol address these distinctions. They correspond to H7 and H8 in the October 19 update.

Recognition over the life of an innovation

The Attribution Dilution Effect concerns whether acknowledgment of a specific originating action is lost as work spreads. It does not presume that the originator deserves permanent dominance in every account. A maintainer's recent improvements can deserve more attention in an operations review than an earlier design. Researchers must define the purpose of the account and test originating-action acknowledgment separately from current value, credit share, and ownership.

The relevant longitudinal comparison follows the same corroborated action across creation, initial adoption, and wider adoption, while accounting for elapsed time and later work. Adoption is selected rather than random: more successful innovations may spread further and attract more contributors. A stage association does not establish that adoption caused forgetting. The protocol's H11 retains this limitation. H12 tests whether a structured history reduces attribution-style differences in a controlled setting. H13 examines team-oriented norms without inferring a person's style from occupation or background.

The reported case in paper 3 contains explicit acknowledgment of the creator. It therefore supplies neither an observed omission nor evidence of a contribution-recognition gap. Its value is to generate questions about information and communication under legitimate shared credit. Prospective corroboration and outcome measurement are required before describing unequal recognition as a finding.

4 A defensible measurement approach

The first stage records an episode's objective, expected benefit, participants, constraints, and outcome. Evidence can include artifacts, changes in quality, customer accounts, risk analyses, and structured stakeholder statements. The second stage records who receives explicit credit and for what action in the same episode. The third stage identifies agreements, omissions, contradictions, and uncertainty. These are records for adjudication rather than inputs to an automatic merit score.

Evidence comparison	Provisional finding	Required follow-up
Relevant contribution corroborated and acknowledged	Apparent correspondence	Check whether the same standard covers less visible work
Relevant contribution corroborated and omitted	Possible omission	Ask evaluator and contributor for context and corrections
Credit recorded without sufficient corroboration	Unverified credit	Seek missing evidence before inferring overclaiming
Sources conflict or coverage is weak	Unresolved	Preserve disagreement and avoid an individual conclusion

Corroboration means that independent sources support the stated action. It does not mean a person has a validated quantity of contribution. Auditors must document the quality and independence of their sources. Two accounts copied from the same project summary are not independent confirmation. An artifact may show authorship without establishing usefulness, and customer praise may omit internal enabling work.

Role-sensitive rubrics should define quality, timeliness, risk, and collective outcomes before cases are reviewed. A maintenance assignment should not be compared with a sales role using revenue alone. Independent reviewers should record uncertainty and disagreements. When reviewers can recognize employees from work artifacts, partial masking should not be described as complete blinding.

5 Why a subtraction score is inadequate

Subtracting a recognition rating from a contribution rating assumes comparable units and a justified equality benchmark. Neither follows from using the same response scale. A value of four on one survey item does not mean the same quantity as four on another construct. Standardizing both variables creates relative positions in a selected sample, not a measure of deserved recognition.

Difference-score problems in congruence research provide a methodological warning (Edwards, 1994 [R14]). CVT therefore keeps contribution evidence and recognition measures separate. The main observational analysis estimates recognition conditional on relevant contribution indicators and the prespecified opportunity context. Residuals describe deviations from a fitted model. They are model-dependent and cannot identify unfair treatment of particular employees.

If commensurate measures are later developed, researchers may evaluate joint surfaces or multivariate models. They must justify the substantive equality line and estimate uncertainty. Selecting a statistical method does not solve the normative question of what recognition should mean. The audit in this package uses documented discrepancies and process findings rather than a numerical gap index.

6 Testable expectations and research designs

The first prediction is temporal: relevant evidence exposure at an earlier wave predicts subsequent credit, conditional on the evidence available at baseline. This is H1 in the research protocol and is an observational association. The alternative is that exposure is a proxy for productive coordination or prior evaluator trust. Measuring these factors does not guarantee that all confounding disappears.

The second prediction concerns information design. In a randomized vignette, equal contributions can appear with different presenter prominence. H2 tests whether a structured contribution record reduces the effect of irrelevant prominence on assigned credit. Randomization supports an inference about that manipulated information environment, not a conclusion about workplace promotion rates.

The third prediction concerns processes. If documentation improves only the measured narrative while leaving opportunity access unequal, recognition can appear more aligned while careers remain constrained. The research should therefore report attribution, recorded recognition, and opportunity outcomes separately. An organization could improve one and worsen another.

A useful field study obtains evidence before an evaluation, captures evaluators' exposure without treating favorability as visibility, and records the final acknowledgment. Team and evaluator clustering matter. Evaluators may see the same employees repeatedly. Analysts should prespecify what enters the model, which stage is the primary endpoint, and how missing episodes affect inference. The accompanying protocol sets out those decisions.

7 Fairness perceptions and attribution accuracy

Employees' perceptions are consequential experiences but do not replace evidence reconstruction. Colquitt (2001 [R08]) distinguishes dimensions of organizational justice, which cautions against collapsing procedure and outcome into a single favorable-attitude measure. CVT's original survey items ask about reported experience and process access. They do not inherit validity from the justice literature.

A person may perceive unfairness despite accurate credit because the allocation rule is opaque or because comparable work receives different treatment. An employee may report satisfaction despite systematic omission. The research should examine these differences rather than treat disagreement as error by one side. Interviews can clarify what participants interpret as contribution, recognition, or an opportunity.

Shared-source measurement creates a further problem. If the same respondent rates their own contribution and recognition at one time, general dissatisfaction may affect both. Method bias is a documented methodological concern (Podsakoff et al., 2003 [R09]). Multiple sources, separated measurement occasions, and concrete episode questions reduce some risks without eliminating them. A single factor check cannot certify the absence of bias.

8 Conditions that would weaken the account

The proposed exposure mechanism would be weakened if adequately powered studies found a precisely negligible exposure association after reliable contribution measurement in the settings specified by CVT. The structured-record proposition would be weakened if it failed to change the prominence effect across well-executed replications. A positive effect accompanied by greater omission of preventive work would also challenge the intervention's usefulness.

Apparent gaps might disappear after including coordination, assignment resources, or prospective role criteria. That would support a rival account rather than justify redefining those contributions out of the analysis. A survey that cannot distinguish process clarity from general satisfaction should not be retained because it yields appealing narratives. Theory revision must remain possible even when the original workplace observation feels compelling.

9 Practical implications and limits

Managers can make evaluation claims more reviewable by naming outcomes, enabling actions, source limitations, and joint contributors. They can explain the difference between acknowledgment of completed work and selection for future roles. They can create a correction route that does not require a contributor to confront a more powerful colleague publicly. These are proposed practices whose effectiveness and burdens need evaluation.

An audit should not retrospectively alter compensation on the basis of CVT alone. It can identify missing evidence or inconsistent process, after which the organization uses its established review procedures. Employees should have access to relevant corrections and be protected from retaliation. The management kit supplies a record template and an unresolved-case route. The Contribution Attribution Assessment adds separate employee, manager, and record-review modules. Its item reports and evidence checks cannot establish individual unfairness or a validated attribution score.

10 Conclusion

The contribution-recognition gap is best treated as an evidence problem with a stated normative benchmark. CVT proposes mechanisms that can generate omissions and misattribution, while allowing rational allocation, productive coordination, and measurement error to explain apparently similar patterns. Separating these possibilities is the research task. A universal gap score would obscure the very distinctions the framework needs to test.

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