

PAYROLL: THE JOB FOR LIFE

Jody Cox MCIPP, Head of Pay and Reward, Achieve Together, shares a glimpse into her payroll journey and tells us why she loves the pay profession



My mum always wanted me to be a hairdresser. She promised it wasn't just because she wanted free cuts, but because people would always have hair that needs cutting, so it was a 'job for life.' And although hairdressing might seem like a strange comparator to payroll, there really are many similarities; everyone has a different style, it's always evolving and when it goes wrong, it can be costly and time consuming to fix.

I can say with absolute certainty that hair isn't my 'thing' (mum bun, anyone?), but after almost 20 years in the pay industry, I've found my calling, and I couldn't be happier or prouder that I champion payroll as a career path.

As I reflect on what's encouraged me to stay in this industry, I realise there are

so many reasons, probably enough for me to fill the entire magazine on my own! But fortunately for you, dear reader, I do have a word limit to observe. Join me for a little stroll down payroll memory lane.

I started with processing payroll for a relatively small population of staff alongside other finance duties. I still remember manually downloading the tax codes from the PAYE Desktop Viewer, having to check the sequence numbers to get them in the right order and then key them in, how times have changed! A large part of my role was reviewing spreadsheets and payroll reports for variances, channelling my inner Sherlock Holmes to get to the bottom of anything 'odd' looking – a skill that's stayed with me throughout the past two decades.

Over the next ten years, I worked on:

- the introduction of automatic enrolment

- a complete re-design of payslips
- onboarding of new business acquisitions
- building a dedicated payroll team from scratch.

Although there were many challenging days, there haven't been any dull or uninspiring ones. And of course, I've made mistakes. I wouldn't be human if I didn't. Early on in my journey I may have been embarrassed or defensive, however, I now own errors, reflect on them and use them as opportunities to learn and grow.

One of my favourites journeys so far has involved working on implementations. The first project I took complete responsibility for involved implementing new payroll software, and this gave me the opportunity to draw on my technical knowledge and learn lots of new project and stakeholder management skills, as well as acronyms. **Lots** of acronyms.



However, my favourite implementation to date involved a query management system for employees, because the impact on our workforce was revolutionary. We no longer needed that magic crystal ball, and efficiencies were felt across so many business departments. Pay is so important and emotive, that being able to facilitate better quality communication was super rewarding and empowering for both the workforce and the payroll team. My enjoyment had absolutely nothing to do with the brightly coloured dashboard that came with it, promise.

Over the years I've also been able to business partner with human resource and finance teams in various areas, from hosting legislative updates on subjects like National Insurance changes, to reconciling control accounts. These cross-function collaborations help to showcase the critical information payroll holds and the strategic value it can bring to the business.

I'm a huge advocate of being personable and I believe every connection counts. Putting a face to a name, flashing a smile and giving a warm greeting can completely de-escalate any frustrations when employees have queries or concerns. Working within such an emotive area means I embrace empathy, sensitivity and often 'keep calm and carry on' during challenging times. I've loved presenting on benefits and pensions to employees, helping to improve their financial wellbeing

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and empower them with facts and know-how.

There's one thing I sadly didn't realise until the last few years though, and that's how amazingly transferable all those key skills are. I often felt like my progression had been a case of 'right place right time', and it was only when I took a complete leap of faith (or madness) and moved from the private to public sector that I saw myself in a more positive light. Despite a few 'rabbit in headlight' moments in the first week, during my time there I've been able to bring about positive change, increase confidence in the team and improve processes and relationships across the organisation.

I recognise the same confidence concerns in many of my payroll colleagues, but it's almost always unfounded. To work, stay and grow in payroll, you need to be tenacious, organised, dedicated, knowledgeable and conscientious. Don't be shy about singing your own praises, or those of your teams and colleagues. Peer to peer recognition is highly valued – maybe after reading this article you could

take a moment to thank someone or point out a job well done.

Your career in this industry doesn't have to be linear at all. There are so many options open to you, whether you choose to move through the ranks of payroll management, go into global payroll, pursue benefit and reward management, explore pensions or take on a combination of all the above. I've worked with people who took a break from payroll for a few years, came back and felt like they'd never been away. So just keep being the amazing payroll professionals you are and give yourselves a big pat on the back for being so awesome.

When I returned to the private sector again this autumn, I took with me even more valuable experience to draw on. I now have confidence in my ability to adapt to new environments, make positive change and deliver great customer service.

Regardless of the system, sector or process, employees are always going to need to be paid. So, I absolutely did get that 'job for life', just without the scissors and comb, sorry mum! ■

