

The payroll professional: the heart of the payroll support network

Jody Cox MCIPP, Head of Payroll, Pensions and Human Resource Systems, Medway Council, explains the inspiration behind setting up the Payroll Support Network (PSN) – a place for payroll professionals to come together to support and help one another



I wish I could write that I chose payroll. But like many of us in the industry, I fell into this profession from a finance and accountancy background. As much as I've thoroughly loved the rollercoaster ride, at times it's felt like an uphill and lonely battle against the tide of legislative changes, workplace unappreciation and constant deadline pressure.

Much of my payroll knowledge has been acquired by excessive use of Google, a sprinkle of transferable knowledge from my accountancy studies and a lot of the power of deduction, or just trial and error if I'm being completely honest. Although I worked in a large finance department for much of my career, I'm assumed to be the expert by my team, leaving me little in the way of professional moral support and peer review.

A gap in the industry

Although there are wonderful organisations (like the CIPP) offering membership support, training and qualifications, I felt payroll as an industry has lacked some of the networking groups and opportunities available in many of our comparative professions. When I found an opportunity to register as a mentor with the Global Payroll Association I was thrilled. It felt like I'd found the missing piece of my career puzzle. Having just been through a significant implementation project, and working in a high volume and complex business, I felt I might have some worthwhile experience that could be helpful to another payroll professional.

That registration led me to connect with another payroll manager, and even though I was supposed to be her mentor, I can honestly say I've gained so much myself since we had our first meeting. We've connected almost weekly to discuss staffing, systems, tenders, compliance and sometimes we just have a good moan and laugh over our trials and tribulations. Over a year later, we still meet regularly. Our experience was the initial inspiration for forming the network, in the hope of creating more opportunities for other payrollers to meet and find camaraderie and support.

Positive feedback

I first posted about a support network for individuals working within payroll at the end of 2024 and was amazed at the positive feedback the idea received. It felt as though there was a much-needed space for a peer-to-peer support group, and I decided to put the wheels in motion, formally creating

the PSN on LinkedIn at the start of the year. Conscious that many may not have access to financial support for CIPP membership or to attend face-to-face events (particularly in the public sector), holding free online sessions seemed the logical first step, making participation as accessible as possible.

The first online meeting was held at the end of January. I'd been concerned in the lead up to the session as to whether anyone would turn up, let alone talk. Fortunately, I worried over nothing. A small group of attendees, from a variety of industries and roles, came together over lunchtime, to discuss topics such as:

- payroll of benefits
- staffing and recruitment
- personal tax accounts
- qualifications
- much more.

We also completely overran the original one-hour slot – apparently payrollers have a lot to say!

The power of connection

Within that first ever hour, the power of connection was evident. Two attendees working with the same system arranged to work through some functionality together, and other attendees kindly shared some template documents relating to payroll benefits and candidate technical skill assessments. Some attendees shared more about their roles, industries and current challenges, while others put forward concerns or questions to get input from others on the call. It felt positive, it felt personal and it felt like a big step forward in creating a culture of collaboration.

In our second session, one of our attendees described the network as being the payroll family they didn't have but had really needed. A WhatsApp group soon followed, helping us to keep in touch between sessions and get a sense check when needed – sometimes even the most experienced of us have a bit of brain fade from time to time. Many more instances of moral and tangible support have been seen since, including the most amazing out-of-hours assistance when a member had a system issue. Some of our members have even managed to meet in person at recent events, and it can be so nice to see a friendly and familiar face when attending alone.

Growing in reach and popularity

As attendee numbers grew, it felt the right time to add some new sessions to facilitate

more detailed discussion and introductions. To date, additional calls have been held for:

- payroll managers
- practice and sole payrollers
- those looking to carry out implementation projects
- anyone looking to be part of a PSN mentoring programme.

In April, we welcomed almost 60 colleagues to our sessions, and almost two thirds of those attendees came to more than one discussion. So many wonderful and exciting ideas have been generated, and we've also acted as a Think Tank with a payroll software developer who wanted to hear our challenges and reflect on them for potential development opportunities.

Truly everyone is welcome to come along to our calls. There's no expectation to have your camera on or join in the discussion – some attendees prefer to use the chat function to put forward their points of view and others are happy just to listen and digest.

The strength and longevity of the network lies in the diversity and passion of every member who joins us. I've been truly humbled by the sincerity and selflessness of those participating; they've embodied every hope I had for meaningful connection. However, I'm not amazed by this, as you must be a special kind of person to work (and stay) within payroll. One thing I certainly am is proud of our profession and people.

The network has progressed more than I could have possibly imagined within its short life already. I hope we can use our collective voice, numbers and experiences to empower our colleagues, shape the future of payroll, banish any imposter syndrome we have and make positive and impactful change where it's long overdue. As an impartial group, we can challenge the status quo and build content that's by payrollers for payrollers, one online session at a time. ■

I'm very grateful to the CIPP for its positivity regarding collaborating with the network. We loved having Dawn Baxter, Membership Manager, at our June general chat session, to explain how the Institute can support colleagues across the industry.

I'm really looking forward to seeing how this partnership will work in the future. I believe this means a more diverse, inclusive and positive space for all payroll professionals to be seen, heard and appreciated.