

Speaker 1:

Welcome to PayTalk, the podcast for payroll professionals, with your host Nina Talley. In the podcast, we explore the human side of payroll by speaking with global industry leaders, who provide their unique insights to help listeners better understand the issues important to them and their careers.

Nina Talley:

Hey, everyone. Thanks for joining us for PayTalk, the podcast that brings you payroll's human side. I'm your host Nina Talley, and today, we're joined by Linda Obertin, CPP, the senior vice president of human resources, and a global payroll leader at Wells Fargo, and Dimitris Papageorgiou, the managing director in strategy consulting at Accenture, focusing on HR and payroll transformation. Thank you both for joining us today.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

Thanks you for having us.

Linda Obertin:

Hi, Nina, it's great to be here today.

Nina Talley:

Well, I just want to give our listeners a little bit of background information on you both. You've worked in payroll for quite some time, and you have a lot of experience between the both of you. Linda, I'd love to hear a little bit about you. Why don't you inform our listeners?

Linda Obertin:

Hi, yes, thank you. Well, through very humble beginnings, I began as a single person payroll and benefits administrator about 25 years ago, and have grown my career through experiences and expanded roles and responsibilities to lead global payroll teams, supporting organizations, with over 300,000 resources located in many countries. Again, my beginning started with just 300 employees and a single site, and just through various experiences, I have been able to grow my career. Global payroll has truly taken me around the world and I've enjoyed working in Europe, Asia, and leading global teams with a very significant global footprint.

Linda Obertin:

I'm very proud to be active in the payroll industry through the APA, where I served on the board of directors, and have been a past president. I also had the pleasure serving on various advisory boards, with the focus on leading practices, benchmarking, and service delivery excellence.

Nina Talley:

Oh, that sounds so exciting, Linda, and thank you for sharing your expertise with us and our listeners today. Dimitris, why don't you give us a little background on your experience?

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

Thank you for having us here today, and I will also share that I had similar humble beginnings in the space as Linda. I started by being a junior payroll analyst at a small professional employer organization,

and worked my way through to payroll manager. That specific organization I stayed with for about five years, and we served a multitude of clients. So, we were actually processing payroll on behalf of several clients in very diversified type of industries, from construction, to hospitality, to security companies, and everything in between.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

That gave me a very, very unique, I would say, foundation in terms of understanding end to end payroll process, including the benefits administration side of payroll, as well as the HR data administration side of payroll. Which eventually led to my second role in the payroll space with a global bank, Swiss Bank. I worked with them for three years in the US and two years in Switzerland, where I had the oversight of global payroll operations.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

Subsequently, I made the jump to consulting and joined Ernst & Young where I stayed for nine years. Being part of the payroll advisor group, I actually created the payroll biannual survey that EY has been administering for us since 2013. Recently, made the move over to Accenture, where I think being given a platform to bring forward the intelligent operating model around payroll and connecting the dots with HR technology.

Nina Talley:

That's so incredible, and I'm really excited to have you both with us today, because our topic for today is all about strategy. I think that both of your experiences fall in perfectly with being a strategic payroll professional. So, I think to kick things off, how and what does being a strategic payroll professional mean to you, Dimitris?

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

I think it is an individual that is able to anticipate issues in the work environment from a payroll perspective, that provides a user inclined experience to the individual service by the payroll department that is second to none. That also moves payroll from the transactional and more of a back office operation in the eyes of many, to the center of insights and business intelligence that we have seen payroll emerge in recent years.

Nina Talley:

Linda, what does it mean to you?

Linda Obertin:

Being strategic really covers all aspects of running a successful business. There's immediate focus on talents, workforce planning to have the right skills and the right place at the right time, in a dynamically changing environments, aligning key services to meet business needs. Optimizing technology through insourcing, perhaps in outsourcing, decisions are key within the delivery model. But also as Dimitris mentioned, it's also understanding the value proposition outside of the payroll fundamentals. It's truly how we become broader strategic leaders within our organization.

Linda Obertin:

Payroll is a rich data source and touches almost every employee in the organization through some type of events, payroll delivery itself, or even as organizations change through dynamics of the business changing, or having an organizational structure event. Understanding how they influence leadership and having a seat at the table for decision making is critical. So, we also influence employee engagement and lead to overall business success. Also, understanding the regulatory landscape really allows us leaders to impact the bottom line.

Linda Obertin:

Again, having that customer focus, as Dimitris, mentioned is key, because we're all about the customer impact, customer service, and ensuring that we're maintaining the engagement level for our customers with the business.

Nina Talley:

I want to touch on what you said about the true value add of payroll. Do you think that that rest in the data, or is it broad? What would you say has been the biggest value add that you can bring forward to your business?

Linda Obertin:

That's an ideal question for Dimitris and I because we began our relationship through benchmarking and discussing best practices. We're both really into data and metrics. Understanding the efficiency of how we're running our business, the cost of services, is critical, but also using data to tell that story. As Dimitris mentioned, our organizations have key critical missions to service our external customers. With that focus in mind, understanding the value proposition that we bring through data, helping leaders understand that we can influence our employees for higher performance, we can influence bottom line results.

Linda Obertin:

Even more than that, we can bring leading solutions to the table that also can influence the way that we conduct our business, is key. But that story is sort of hidden until we become more visible and we have that seat at that table so that our leaders truly can understand that value proposition. Relationship management, of course, is intertwined as well, ensuring that we have built all the right relationships, again, outside of our organization. That's where many strategic leaders spend 30% to 40% of their time.

Linda Obertin:

It's working on relationships, it's building that confidence with leaders, telling our story each and every day to individuals so that we can continue to influence the way we do business for our firms.

Nina Talley:

Have you seen any places where data and relationship networking building can intersect and help with one another?

Linda Obertin:

Actually, I think in almost every aspect of every corner I turn, whether we're looking to make a decision to extend with a merger, acquisition, data is key to understand the cost of doing business. Just in general budget planning, to ensure that we're delivering the effective services for all of our employees, what's

the cost of a new service, we'd like to bring to the table. But also, for our leaders to understand there are ways, perhaps even through an implementation and investment, we can reduce future cost.

Linda Obertin:

So, looking at strategic investment opportunities to be more customer centric, to deliver our services more efficiently, and also maintain regulatory compliance. I think that's one of the big challenges within the global payroll industry but also in the US, with the changing landscape from a state by state perspective. Our cost continue to rise just to stay in alignment with regulatory compliance. So, we as leaders need to be creative because we cannot just continue to have increasing expenses. We also need to demonstrate how we can bring back savings to the firm.

Nina Talley:

It's very interesting and, Dimitris, I would love to hear from you a bit on how compliance regulations are factoring into your existing strategic process.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

Well, I think every payroll's mission in the world, every payroll department's mission in the world is to process one pay for an employee 100% accurate, and then repeat that process times the number of employees that the organization has. So, it doesn't matter if you're payrolling a group of 10, or you're payrolling half a million employees, you need to get that 100% right. What is to be taken into context is that a payroll is not a stagnant or stale, I would say, transaction. It is something that continuously changes. There is nothing that repeats from the prior pay period from a calculation's perspective.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

Everything is additive, everything is in addition to what has already happened with new data and new inputs into the process. So, when we do recognize that, we understand that the payroll accuracy quite honestly is our table stakes. The additive elements that I would say you can bring in from a compliance perspective to the organization is when you start introducing what will make your payroll audit proof, what will make your payroll continuously evolving from an operational excellence perspective, to avoid committing any kind of incidents that would present a risk to the organization from a compliance perspective.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

So, adding that exoskeleton, I would say, of operational excellence in addition to continuous improvement to your regular processing is what starts moving the needle from a compliance perspective and allowing you to gain the efficiencies that Linda mentioned. As the cost of compliance increases, you can bring in those efficiencies back to offset that increasing cost.

Nina Talley:

That's very interesting, and I completely agree that it is all about that cost shift and that compliance regulations. They're not going away. It's going to continue to shift the payroll process. It's just a matter of how in the future. I would love to get, Linda, your thoughts on how have you actually seen the payroll role over the last 15, 20 years shift and evolve, and what are the factors that have been shifting? Is it mostly compliance related, or is there a human factor there?

Linda Obertin:

Nina, I think every aspect of how we conduct our business in the payroll industry has changed. It began with the evolution of a lot of manual head downs effort, moving to systemic solutions. So, we move from having to understand calculations to understanding how we deliver our services more effectively. We also have moved from being very process centric, which we still need to have our process head on every day, but also understanding the services. What is the impact of delivering that service to our customers, and what is our net promoter score? How are we perceived in the organization?

Linda Obertin:

So, really taking on a different perspective for our customer sat. Also, as we've been discussing, the evolution from let's say, back office organization to strategic business partner, through the presence of data, sharing our data to the enterprise from a holistic perspective so that we can make better informed business decisions. And again, continuing to have a voice at the table so that we're not missing any important aspects through the organizational changes, as I mentioned previously, whether it's a merger, a divestiture, a changing business structure, delivering new business services to our customers.

Linda Obertin:

There's ongoing internal regulatory and also servicing that needs to be considered. If you miss one of those key aspects, and one of those key aspects is payroll, it actually could fail the entire service to an external customer. So, having that seat at the table, being involved in discussions early will help protect our organizations from any type of detrimental impacts for not having the regulatory view, not having the integral cost included in that service. Also, not being able to think more longer term within our road maps and all of our solutions.

Linda Obertin:

So, it's really critical that payroll, again, becomes more strategic as a partner, that we reach out from a relationship perspective and work really closely with all of our key stakeholders and our partners. In the past, I think we had a little more latitude to provide and focus the foundational services. But again, those foundational services now are becoming automated. I know Dimitris will tell us more, and I really am excited about his background in artificial intelligence and how in the future, again, we'll become even more touchless, which we need to.

Linda Obertin:

Again, especially in the situation we're in today with COVID, handling paper is a risk. When we can eliminate paper, we can automate the transactions, it actually allows us to leverage more of our analytical and our strategic leadership so we can be looking always to the future, and looking out for our organization so that we're always being protected and that we can help and be flexible to any situation.

Nina Talley:

For a payroll professional who is trying to get that seat at the table, or maybe even creating the seat for themselves, what would you suggest that they do?

Linda Obertin:

Well, I'll share some of the practices that have really helped with my career progression. The first is to find a really great mentor, role model, coach. Someone who can help you really review what are your

key strengths, what are your attributes, and how can you continue to grow the skills that you're looking so you can achieve. Some individuals may not want to, actually, be strategic. Some individuals may want to be the best project leader that there is. It's really important to understand initially what are your goals, what are your dreams, and who can help me on that path.

Linda Obertin:

Again, those coaches and mentors may change based on which part of your career path you're progressing through, but always have those individuals that you can reach out to, you can receive honest advice. Attend leadership forums or any other type of educational opportunity. I've grown my career through daily educational opportunities. Whether that's an online minute of learning, following other leaders like Dimitris, and understanding their perspectives, but also ensuring that I'm very confident in the businesses that I ran and the success that we've achieved.

Linda Obertin:

But I also need to question that each and every day as well to ensure that I'm changing. Because my career has been about change, and it's about resiliency, being flexible, but the key is being open to change. Many times in our profession, we have achieved our success because we've created that solid foundation, and that foundation is so strong that we would not like to introduce change, because it's working great as it is. But we need to really be thoughtful about how can I change it to take it to the next level.

Linda Obertin:

I think having networks for best practices, benchmarking, is another great resource to network with peers and do some benchmarking. I think it's very insightful. But again, find some great leaders that can provide guidance and advice. Read various thought leaders, whether it's in management, whether it's in best practices. We have so many in our industry. We have great tools such as PayTech and the GPMI institute to help provide various articles and insights. But really stay connected and stay on top of the industry, because it is leaning forward each and every day.

Linda Obertin:

One of my sayings as well, if you're not on the train, the train will leave the station without you. So, you need to be prepared and have all of the tools in your toolkit that will help propel you forward.

Nina Talley:

I love it. That is such great practical advice. Also, a lot of applicability in other venues as well not just payroll. So, thank you so much for that insight. I'm going to be holding that one with me for a while. But I do want to jump back to Dimitris, and just ask a little bit and follow up a little bit about what Linda had touched on with AI and automation. As you're sort of entrenched in that world now, where do you think AI and automation are going in the world of payroll?

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

As in every other aspect of our life, we're expecting seamless and additive services from many applications that we use. That's where I think AI and automation come into play with payroll. As every payroll professional knows, every time that payroll processes, we deal with exceptions. The goal is to get the number of exceptions to a number that it's either manageable or completely extinct. Although it

doesn't happen often, where we have no exceptions whatsoever, especially when you process a large diversified payrolls in terms of the population you're servicing.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

Having that knowledge though, we know that by utilizing some machine learning, where we start learning by the mistakes committed and proactively look for them, is an element that would give us more of the time needed for us to process quality payroll, in addition to informing the model from a machine learning perspective as to what it needs to be looking for. So, that way, we don't necessarily deal with the same issues payroll after payroll, but we try to eliminate the new incidents that could be presented with logic that has been embedded into our validation systems.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

From an automation perspective, as everybody knows that is relevant to payroll, there is a lot of transactional activity. The way that we standardize some of that transactional activity is by providing integrations between systems, by creating data portals to allow the aggregation and consolidation of information prior to processing. Anytime that you introduce two technologies speaking to each other, automation can lend itself in terms of the data shuttle and the data entry that has to be done between systems versus a human.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

It doesn't make the human obsolete, it just allows the human to focus on more value add creative services.

Nina Talley:

I love that, because there is a lot of fear with AI and automation, that it is going to replace the human. But if we can shift our perception that it enhances the human, it gives the human more time and it allows the human to focus on the human side of payroll, which is so needed and oftentimes overlooked, that's an incredible outlook for automation in payroll.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

Nina, I will add to that, I think the best example that I have found in terms of where we are using today a lot of automation and AI, but it did not make humans obsolete is commercial airline pilots. We still have two pilots in the cockpit every time that we take a domestic flight, but a lot of the flying is fly by wire. So, there's a lot of AI that assesses a lot of the inputs from the external environment of the plane as well as the internal, and aids them in making the flight safer but it did not make the pilots obsolete.

Nina Talley:

That's a fabulous example. I love it. That is such real world application. Thank you so much for that insight, Dimitris.

Speaker 1:

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Nina Talley:

I wanted to see if either of you had an example of when strategic decision making had a positive impact on your work or on your business.

Linda Obertin:

Nina, I'm actually going to jump in and talk about BCP planning as a key component to having a holistic strategic approach. I've always strived to ensure all of my employees have the ability to work remotely, and that has been a key component to surviving through the COVID scenario that we're in today. I've been through many different situations of business disruptions around the world, whether it's political, where there may be a situation where the government is actually perhaps shutting down the country, individuals are fleeing from the country.

Linda Obertin:

I've managed through many different natural disasters, hurricanes, wild fires, through terrorist activities, and one of the key strategies that we need to have in place is to anticipate a worst case scenario and how would we manage through that. Again, working remotely, ensuring that we are as automated as possible, that we're dealing with the least amount of paper in our systems. Today, most of our paper is generated through government agencies, not through internal business operations. It's more on the side of legal orders coming into the organization from certain jurisdictions.

Linda Obertin:

But always being prepared. I feel that, again, from a strategy perspective, we can have the greatest plans and have the most beautiful roadmaps, but strategy needs execution, and it's truly being able to deliver on the strategy that enables success. Because many organizations talk about having a great BCP plan, it sits on the shelf and looks really pretty, it's 500 pages. When something happens, we'll bring it down and we'll start reviewing what we need to do. But practicing, implementing, and delivering on this strategic story includes the ability to deliver.

Linda Obertin:

That has been a key to the success of my career, is having that ability to deliver on the strategy. Many organizations struggle with how do we actually take a strategy, and then we implement it to make it real. That's one of the critical aspects of being strategic, is ensuring that, again, that delivery aspect is what can make or break an organization. It also can be the factor that creates a competitive advantage for organizations because you are able to deliver.

Nina Talley:

It's such an obvious thing to see, when the strategy works. It's one of those things that as you're developing a strategy, it can seem, to some, a little pointless because it is worst case scenario and you could be spending your time on something that's happening right now. So, I think that that's a lovely example of how strategy is strategy but it has to be delivered upon. Dimitris, do you have any examples of when strategy really came through for you and added value to your business?

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

Absolutely. One comment about strategy before I share the example is, sometimes our strategy has to be extremely advanced and extremely basic. You really don't know what is coming your way. We've



experienced in the last 20 years both spectrum of crisis. I'll give you the example of in 2001, with 9/11, you could not go to a bank and get money from an ATM for several days, especially if you were in the tri-State area. So, the only way you could actually do payroll and get money into people's hands was by having cash.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

Who would have thought that you needed to have cash aside for payroll purposes in the day that every transaction was happening with direct deposit and with ATM withdrawals? But that became a necessity and a reality for us in a very violent and abrupt manner. The same way that with COVID now, we are seeing that everybody needs to be able to work remotely and isolated, but still be able to conduct all the activities and all the task that they were tasked with while being in the office.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

So, I think the spectrum of possibilities from a strategy perspective is endless, and we really need to be flexible going into that strategy planning and that strategy thinking. Because as many have said, every strategy and every battle plan end at the beginning of the battle. So, we really need to have the agility in our strategy plans to be able to pivot to what the requirements are for the situation we're dealing with.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

The example that I will give you is, in 9/11 we actually had to physically bring money to Puerto Rico to payroll our employees. Because there was no way of getting money to them any other way.

Nina Talley:

Wow.

Linda Obertin:

Nina, if you don't mind, I'll actually add on, during that timeframe I was with a different organization but we also literally had to drive cash to the tri-State area. Then, first of all, find a way to communicate because phones were not working. We found text was the only way at that point at time. Find a way to meet individuals, some of them were survivors, unfortunately, and maybe loss their spouse, and their spouses are employee, but we're trying to ensure all the family's needs were met, so we were driving a large amounts of cash up to the tri-State area.

Linda Obertin:

Again, communications, delivery, again, those are things, worst case plans you can never imagine you have to leverage. But having a strategy in place gives you that foundation to say, "Well, I've planned for X, Y, and Z, and this is just a little bit different and I can stretch and I can make it happen." Payroll professionals are the most dedicated, I found in any organization, they're going to do whatever it takes, and that whatever it takes mentality truly will be able to stretch and flex.

Linda Obertin:

But it's not something we do each and every day, but having that strategy allows us to give us that initial playbook. Then, we may have to go off the page slightly for some of these unique situations. But that strategy is what enables us to take that, I'll say, that extra step.

Nina Talley:

Yeah.

Linda Obertin:

Just really quick, as we talk about evolution. I know when I started, and I think Dimitris will mention this as well, this is just a quick side note. We both worked with a certain outsource partner, and one of the deliverables of the payroll was actually called a [inaudible 00:28:57] report. It would tell you to deliver your net pay, which may have been \$50,000 and based on what maybe your 20, 30 employee's net pay was, it actually would say, you need 500 twenties.

Linda Obertin:

You need 200 tens, you need [crosstalk 00:29:16] fives, and all the way down to how many quarters, and nickels, and dimes, and pennies you would need to deliver the pay. So, that's just part of the evolution of payroll.

Nina Talley:

That's incredible to hear and it's easy to sit here in 2020 and not have to think about that at all. Definitely, with COVID, and with all these different issues, I think that the pairing of strategy with dynamic problem solving, while focusing on the human aspect of everything is what is really powering payroll professionals to be successful these days. Thank you so much for that insight. I really appreciate you both sharing that with me.

Nina Talley:

With our listeners, just because we are in the middle of frankly a national crisis, and the last time we saw anything similar to this was 9/11, and those are very personal stories. It is easy to overlook the payroll aspect of that story, and I think that that's something that is happening with COVID-19 as well, is that with everything that's overwhelming about the situation, we're not focusing on some of the lesser known heroes, like the payroll professionals who are going above and beyond to make sure that everybody can still pay their bills.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

Nina, if I may add something on this. I think if you look at the CARES Act, to me, when I read the CARES act, it's all about payroll. Because everything that it's included there needs the execution of all the well-intended aid that has been appropriated and somebody needs to get the aid into the hands of individuals. If you look as to how we're helping small businesses, there is loans being granted right now, but the loan basis is how much was your payroll and how much do you need in order to actually get to 150% of that payroll paid for the next few months.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

So, everything revolves around payroll, and I think the payroll professional is not necessarily allowed the same, I would say, for lack of a better word, relaxation that some of us have had in terms of, "My work is actually going to be at 60% or 50% right now because of the circumstances." Because payroll still has to continue going on in the exact same fashion that it happened before the crisis. If anything, actually, it has been added, more work has been added to the payroll professional as a result of the crisis.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

We also have to acknowledge the fact that when you issue a paycheck, you don't issue a payment to a single person. You could be issuing a garnishment to a family that is waiting to receive that check in order to survive from. You could be issuing any kind of levy that the government is also expecting as a result of somebody not being prompt or punctual with payments to the authorities. You're also issuing tax money back to the government so they can make this aid possible for us. It's a much broader, I would say, activity than just getting money into the hands of an individual for the work they're performing.

Nina Talley:

You couldn't be more right about that, and definitely, as we see more and more government regulation coming through to help ease some of this burden, it needs to be taken into consideration. How is it being divvied up, and who is doing the divvying. That's an incredible point. I think it leads us very nicely into the next section of our podcast, which we like to call payroll nightmares. So, for payroll nightmares, in the future, our listeners are going to be encouraged to send us their own personal payroll nightmares to [podcast@americanpayroll.org](mailto:podcast@americanpayroll.org). Or, you can leave us a comment on our Facebook page.

Nina Talley:

Just search for the American Payroll Association, but for our inaugural payroll nightmare, it seemed very appropriate that we talk about the ongoing situation and impact of COVID-19, specifically on payroll operations for an unprepared business. So, I'm going to have Linda discuss what she foresees being a payroll nightmare for a business who is unprepared. Then, both she and Dimitris are going to offer us their insights on what you can do if you weren't prepared before COVID-19, and how you could help ease some of that tension on your business.

Linda Obertin:

Well, thanks, Nina. I fear that there were many organizations who were not prepared, not prepared to work from home. Many individuals may still be going into an office. They still maybe looking to understand, "How do I receive time and attendance information from my employees so that I can ensure we're paying them appropriately, and perhaps we're actually even implementing some new benefits, and I want to ensure that our employees are able to receive those benefits. But I do not have electronic data records at my fingertips.

Linda Obertin:

So, therefore, I have to reach out, perhaps, with a lot of phone calls, with a lot of effort to bring this data to the table so that we can submit for processing." Perhaps, in a worst case scenario, we're still printing checks in our office. Even our supplies, all of us different partners. Partners for supporting our payroll processing or tax filing. Perhaps even for our supplies to receive our check stock. With supply chain in the disarray it is today around the globe, with deliveries and critical needs items, I may not be able to receive my check stock that I need to print checks if I'm still in that scenario.

Linda Obertin:

Which I've heard individuals maybe to print checks in an office. From that point, also, I may not have been set up for all of the electronic delivery. So, employees then need to receive those checks and need to ensure that they're getting out through some type of distribution method. I'm sure hopefully that still

employs today. But if individuals did not sign up for direct deposit, they're reliant on receiving that paper check. Again, our mail process, knock on wood, is still delivering each and every day, but I'm fearful that there could be disruptions to individuals so that they're not actually able to receive their pay.

Linda Obertin:

In addition, they're receiving many questions. If there's not a customer service focused team intercepting those questions from their employees, employees are asking each and every day, "What do I do? I'm not feeling well. I'm not able to come in the office." What if you have a small payroll team and 75% of your payroll team is in an area where they're not doing well and they need quarantine, or perhaps they're even too ill to perform their functions, which again, I hope nobody is in that situation. But it could be even your resources are ill, what is your BCP plan? Who do you bring to the table?

Linda Obertin:

Do you have partners that you can ask to come in and help with that processing on demand? Do you have all of the agreements in place with other organizations, other companies as a back up so that they can be your BCP in the event that you need additional contractors, resources to help with the delivery? Again, I have heard that some organizations still are rather manual in their collections, still rather paper in their check process and in their delivery. In this situation where individuals have stay home orders, then, unfortunately this team still needs to put themselves at risk.

Linda Obertin:

They still need to go into an office setting. They still need to conduct all of these paper management, all of this printing. Then, I'm sure they're spending a lot of time on the phone with their employees to understand when they'll be paid, how much they'll be paid, what are some of the additional benefits that I may be eligible for? Our payroll teams may not be equipped with the answers, or to be able to manage the influx of those calls. Because I know that there are thousands of calls being made each and every day across the country.

Linda Obertin:

From employees who just need some support, and they need answers to questions, and they need to understand, how long should I be quarantined? When do I come back to work? How am I going to get paid in that time that I'm off? If you're not able to communicate via some type of systemic approach to all of your employees, provide policies and information, make it available about what's changed, who do you contact for support? Is there engagement perhaps with even healthcare officials? But in this state as well, emotional health is as critical.

Linda Obertin:

We know individuals are starting to become depressed from the stay home orders. Having really secure employee assistance available is as critical as well for that human factor. So, I do worry from a nightmare perspective that individuals are truly overwhelmed and they're overwhelmed at providing just the basic services. Now, we're getting into that human factor and emotional and health needs.

Nina Talley:

So, for a payroll professional who has just been dropped into the middle of an unprepared business, what would you say would be the best practices to organize their thoughts and begin moving forward?

Linda Obertin:

I would recommend that as we continue to emerge, truly engage with an organization such as the APA to understand best practices. There's a lot of great material on continuity planning for any situation. You need to be prepared for a simple power outage as well as this worst case scenario. I also encourage organizations to have really great partners, from a consultancy perspective. There are great partners like Dimitris, who would help us through these situations, help us ensure that we have plans in place.

Linda Obertin:

That also provides another level of confidence to leadership. We talk about that value proposition, our leaders need to ensure that, again, while they deal with customers and all of our product delivery, that the payroll professional has everything under control. When you have partners at the table who can help you with guidance and delivery, when you have peers you can reach out to, actually, through this scenario, we do have different types of networking groups where we do connect saying, "So, what are you doing?"

Linda Obertin:

What's the latest and greatest for managing this type of situation? Help us." Again, from a strategic perspective we realize we never have all the answers. Our strategy continues to be more robust and more resilient when it's informed by others who have had experience. So, again, network, make connections, ensure you're bringing some third parties to the table them to provide guidance, and also, them testing going forward. As I mentioned, it's all about that delivery and execution, and having to get the best plan on the shelf will not aid you through these scenarios.

Linda Obertin:

You really need to test your plan on a regular basis, but offer all different types of scenarios.

Nina Talley:

Dimitris, from an outside consultant perspective, if you were dropped into a business that was dealing with the COVID-19 payroll nightmare, how would you recommend they move forward?

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

The first thing I would say that need to take place is to understand current state of operations and existing pain points. You could be very well prepared for many types of crisis, but I think the given crisis that we have at hand right now was not necessarily one anticipated to the extent that it has manifests itself. Especially if you're an organization with global operations. So, understanding current state, and pain points, and focusing on your efforts on what will bring immediate relief to those pain points, I would say, would be the starting point for the strategy. Making things incremental versus trying to solve everything at once.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

You also have to understand that the people that are helping you make those plans come to life are being subjected to the same stresses that everybody else is through this crisis. So, given every payroll professional is a super human, no question about it, they always deal with much more stress than the average individuals. But acknowledging that and understanding how you can incrementally bring forth

the solutions to the problems that currently being experienced is going to be critical to getting there. Because otherwise, you're going to overwhelm everybody involved and not get anywhere.

Nina Talley:

A wonderful point, baby steps, small steps are always the best way to get a strategy rolling. Just so that you don't feel overwhelmed by the problem and let's be honest, COVID-19 is an overwhelming problem for many business professionals. So, I do really appreciate you both sharing your insights on that. Hopefully, it can help some payroll professionals as they move forward, and hopefully, COVID-19 clears itself up soon, and we can go back to some version of what normal used to be.

Linda Obertin:

Nina, if you wouldn't mind, I'd also like to add, I think Dimitris said it really well, and very concise. I think this is a perfect time to focus on our foundation services. So, I think where we may have other initiatives underway, let's say, we may need to make some difficult decisions as well. Let's say, perhaps, we are in the middle of an implementation that could be a payroll conversion, a go live, we've had to make really careful decisions.

Linda Obertin:

I encourage everyone to make very careful decisions about what we should pause and then what we should continue delivering. Because we can be overwhelmed, and during this time, individuals were not seeing relief in the near future, and as we've mentioned with the dedication, individuals are working probably 200%. So, in order to have the stamina and be able to care for themselves and care for all of the employees, just really being focused on core deliverables is really critical.

Linda Obertin:

Make difficult decisions, because we always to want do it all. We want to be superhuman and show that, "Well, we can continue with this activity." Perhaps it's a conversion. Perhaps it's a merger acquisition, whatever it may be. But we may need to work with leaders to make really difficult decisions so that we can maintain the health of the business and the health of our employees.

Nina Talley:

That's an incredible point. Nobody wants to pause right now. We all want to keep working through it. We are dealing with an unusual circumstance and overwhelming circumstance. Is it probably time to strategically pause on a few projects, and focus on solving the overwhelming issue that is directly affecting our employees and colleagues. So, I completely agree with that point. Thank you for sharing. I don't really want to leave the podcast on a negative note of COVID.

Nina Talley:

It's already surrounding our lives so much. So, let's do something a little bit more positive here. I have one final question for the two of you. What is the best piece of payroll advice you have ever been given, or alternatively, what's the piece of advice you wish that someone had given to you? Dimitris, why don't we start with you?

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

Advice that I would have for anyone, regardless of where they are in their career, is find what you do best and what makes you you. Go after it vigorously and make it known to others. Find your flaws, identify your flaws and work on them, but also find what makes you different in terms of competitive advantage and bring that forth vigorously. Don't try to emulate others. Don't try to imitate others. Be yourself. Learn from others but always keep in sight your true north and your values, your beliefs, your understanding of things, and try to incorporate other people thinking into that evolve continuously.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

But keep going forward being yourself. Don't change in order to accommodate or fit in somebody else's mold. That would be my advice. I know it's broader than payroll, but in payroll, oftentimes, we find a leader. We try to mold in to be that leader, but that leader was the leader at the time that they were a leader. You can become a better leader or an equally effective leader as that person by being yourself. In terms of advice that I would have liked somebody to have given me was always expect the unexpected.

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

No matter how well you plan, you can plan for the best integration from a business perspective, and the automation, and have the ability to work from home, and power could be down. As it was in Puerto Rico for six months, recently, with Hurricane Maria. So, it doesn't matter how well prepared you are to work from home if there's no power. So, keep that always in mind. Expect the unexpected and be agile in your thinking in order to be able to respond to any challenge coming your way.

Nina Talley:

Wonderful, Linda, same question.

Linda Obertin:

Yeah, so Dimitris said it so well, about, again, find what your passion about and really be genuine. Bring your best self to your position each and every day, regardless of what you were doing. I know sometimes some of my roles were not the most glamorous, and you still need to have passion, bring your best self, continue to educate and grow and develop your skills. One of my keys was to always say yes to a new responsibility. Many times, that could have meant a relocation for me and my family. It could have meant working in a country I had never traveled to before. Residing in a country I hadn't been before.

Linda Obertin:

Managing a situation through my network, through my wonderful colleagues. Through the APA I've been able to take on much broader responsibilities, but it did start by saying yes. So, you have to imagine what's possible, and not think, "Well, I've never done that, so therefore I wouldn't be able to do that, of course." So, imagine the possible. I have a great friend and mentor who can, I'll say, see others before they see themselves. He's always been someone who I confide in to help understand, "Will this be a good decision or not?"

Linda Obertin:

Having, again, that coach, that mentor that you can reach out to for that honest feedback, "What should I do differently?" But many individuals do have a professional coach, and I also recommend having a

professional coach who can be that individual providing honest feedback, help you with your career growth. But one of my keys has always been to say yes, be resilient, be open to change. Actually, as we've been talking about change, and I think about Dimitris, he's always someone who's very positive, who says yes to change.

Linda Obertin:

But more than that, I think we both have this in common, we always say, "How can we reinvent the industry? How can we make this different, better than it's ever been before, different than it was yesterday, different than it will be tomorrow?" So, always think about what's possible. It may not exist today and we'll be inventing the future, which I think is where my passion lies, Dimitris as well, and it's a very exciting place to be. It's very optimistic.

Nina Talley:

It is and if you stay agile and if you say yes to change, you can be the creator of modern payroll practices. Who knows?

Dimitris Papageorgiou:

To Linda's point, I think the common denominator between Linda and I has always been the American Payroll Association. It has always given us the platform to launch from for that reinvention.

Nina Talley:

Well, thank you both so much for your time and your expertise. This has been such an absolutely pleasure. Thank you to our listeners, without you PayTalk would not be possible. Make sure you like and subscribe to us on your preferred podcast streaming service. That is the number one way to support this podcast and ensure that we continue to bring you the human stories that make payroll so personal. Thank you, again, to Linda Obertin and Dimitris Papageorgiou for joining us and sharing their experience. It was such a pleasure. Until next time, folks. This has been your host Nina Talley with PayTalk.

Speaker 1:

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