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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 two guests, Nathan North, Director of Strategic Initiatives for PayrollOrg; and Eric Hachmer, the Americas Global Payroll Operate Leader for EY. We're bringing these two together to discuss the Global Payroll Pulse Survey. It was created in partnership between their two organizations, EY and our very own PayrollOrg. A compilation of pulse surveys with HR, payroll, and finance professionals that were conducted in July of 2022, September of 2022, November of 2022, as well as January of 2023.

The Global Payroll Pulse Survey provides a singularly comprehensive look at the payroll landscape over the last year. Before we get into the thick of this vital, vital data, I would love it if you could both introduce yourselves and tell our listeners a little bit about your background and your work in the payroll space. Nathan, why don't you start?

Nathan North:

Thank you, Nina. Hi, my name is Nathan North. I've been in the payroll space for 20-plus years. I've processed payroll in over 150 countries throughout my career. I managed teams all around the world and I'm excited to be a part of this podcast.

Eric Hachmer:

I'm Eric Hachmer and I'm thrilled to be here as well. Americas Leader for EY for Global Payroll Operate. I've also been in the human capital and payroll space for more than well over 20 years, having worked on the consulting side at Mercer, on the HR and payroll side with ADP before that in the technology space. My career has always been about working with clients on the transformation journey and specifically around how they can build that HCM strategy to provide the greatest value to the organization and to their employees. Again, I'm thrilled to be here. Looking forward to it.

Nina Talley:

I'm so excited for this conversation because of your experiences. I think that this is a wonderful way to look at the data and then actually apply it to your own anecdotal experience and be able to glean not just the data that's impressive, but the data that will have an impact on people's lives and maybe help how they're operating inside of payroll. I'm going to do my best to just let you two experts just go over this vital data, as well as those personal insights and analysis that I think are really, really valuable here. But before we do that, can you share with our listeners a bit about the survey methodology itself and maybe even give us an overview on the demographics?

Eric Hachmer:

Be my pleasure, Nina. First of all, from an EY perspective, we do a lot of research and we do a lot of surveys, including a global payroll survey, including a Work

Reimagined Survey. But with our partnership with PayrollOrg, we decided, "You know what? Let's address this community in a pulse format, a couple of questions every few months to measure sentiment, priorities, areas of interest, things that this community is thinking about that's influencing what they're doing today and what they want to be doing a few years from now."

So we went to the entire payroll organization audience, got a mix of large, medium, small organizations, organizations that have a domestic or a global focus, a really nice mix. And those people that are engaged in these types of questions, thought leaders in their own space and want to understand what other similar leaders and organizations are thinking. A really nice broad set of stakeholders over the course of about eight months and a really easy format just to zero in on a couple of areas that talk to the payroll process, the technology aspect, or the broader employee and mobility side. Just a little bit about the survey.

Nina Talley:

Let's start big. Can you tell us some of the survey findings regarding payroll operations in general?

Nathan North:

Yeah, absolutely. One of the questions that were on the pulse surveys was enhancing the performance and accuracy of the payroll process while ensuring compliance is critical for multi-country payroll buyers. We asked the folks that took the survey to rank their top priorities over the next three years. It's kind of interesting. Obviously, always at the top, I believe, in most of these types of surveys... Accuracy and compliance came out as a clear front runner. Eric, what is your thought in regards to the survey results?

Eric Hachmer:

I'm not surprised, to be honest with you, Nathan, because we joked, "Once you're in payroll, you never leave," because it's the fast [inaudible 00:05:07] and exciting environment. It all comes down to paying our employees on time, accurately, and in a compliant way. Those are the table stakes. That accuracy and compliance doesn't surprise me at all. What's interesting is the next top priority, which was around talent and organizational resiliency. I feel like that's coming from the payroll practitioners themselves versus the broader employee population and end user experience, which ranked well below. I think that's because of just how fast this function is evolving, the demands on this function, the complexity.

I do think that... And I see it every day where the payroll teams are often heroic in their own right because they get things done every week, but they're being asked to do more in different ways and to provide greater value to the organization than ever before. That can be taxing. I'm not surprised that the focus on talent and the resiliency within the function is another key thing that is a priority within the payroll leadership community over the next three years.

Nathan North:

I definitely don't want to lose sight of data quality and insights over reviewing different surveys along with this one. Those numbers are starting to be on the

rise within the payroll practitioner world of looking truly at the data quality, not only coming into the systems, not only going out of the systems, but then also what are the insights that we can gain from the data that we already have. Looking at the data analytics and going back to the organization with data insights that we could provide to whether it's your employer, your client, there's so much valuable information.

Nina Talley:

I completely agree with that. It's a theme that has come up a few times here at PayTalk is the idea of clean data and verifying that your data is clean. A lot of it has to do with the evolving technology landscape and knowing that there are these machine learning algorithms and AI programs that can really make your life easy. They're not here to replace you, they're here to optimize your life, but that in order to use them, you need clean data. Your machine learning algorithms, your optimizations, your predictive analytics are only as good as your data.

Eric Hachmer:

I completely agree. The one thing I would add to that, too, is a week doesn't go by if I'm not talking to a payroll stakeholder who acknowledges a couple of things. One of them is that the C-suite and the board are getting more and more tuned in to key issues and coming to the payroll function for better answers. They're asking for that data in a way that, to your point, is clean and we find this is no surprise to this audience. Often the most clean, accurate data about the employee workforce is in the hands of the payroll department. It has to be. We've got to get people paid.

Nina Talley:

Yes.

Eric Hachmer:

A good example is the CEO may say, "Tell us what our turnover rate is." Well, you can get a pretty accurate view from payroll, because when someone starts and someone leaves, you've got a very specific data point. But if you ask HR that same question, it might be filtered in some ways. They might be applying parameters, they might be eliminating certain things because that's not really within the turnover rate. When you go to payroll, you've got that most accurate data and you can get answers that are unfiltered, that are true to the most strict data. I think there's value that payroll can provide because of that data in a way that other functions can't. Not one or the other, but complementary. I think that that's the power of the function and just why the payroll function is continuing to elevate every day in most organizations.

Nathan North:

Absolutely.

Nina Talley:

I completely agree with all of those points. I think it also touches on something I wanted to make sure that we discussed and I think is a really important part of why we're conducting these surveys is, what does it reveal to us about the evolving payroll technology landscape? What are payroll operations doing with technology and what does it tell us about how the landscape is evolving?

Eric Hachmer:

You've got good questions today, Nina. That one, I want to respond, it depends because what I find is every organization we've work with is on a transformation journey because change is constant. But where you are on that journey and how fast-paced you're moving through it, I think, is key to understanding. Your question about, "Well, what about tech and how is that driving things?" Well, I think it depends, because some organizations are still trying to catch up to some more of the near term things like, "How should the function operate? What should I do around shared services? What's the line between HR and payroll? Can I use a hubbing strategy in regional hubs instead of local to local?"

There's things that technology is already there to support, that some organizations still need to deploy. But then there's the shiny stuff: the artificial intelligence, the machine learning, the digitized worker, the chatbots. All this stuff that a lot of organizations are saying, "I know we've got some catching up to do, but I got to get on the AI [inaudible 00:10:08]." My kids are using ChatGPT to do their essays and I know they're not supposed to, but I think they're doing it. But I got to figure out how to use it at work. I mean, what can I do to change our function? I think it really is a mixture of the very newest, shiny stuff and then some focus on technology that still has some core benefits for the organization that's not yet been realized.

Nathan North:

I also think it's also looking at the four generations of artificial intelligence, where you have your roles based systems, which we're at with payroll systems that's a lot of calculations, a lot of roles that are set up. But then also as you start to look into a second generation of machine learning, which is looking at stats and finding patterns and really in massive amounts of data. And then really leaning into your third generation of really looking at models that are designed automatically that are learned from the data and from the human interaction with the technology, all the way to now what we're seeing in the public domain of generative AI, which is like your chatbots and that sort of thing, except [inaudible 00:11:21] ChatGPT and all the mini tools. I mean, you can Google generative AI tools and you can have endless lists of tools that are now available to us to use. There's also gaining that understanding of what is all involved in this world of AI.

Nina Talley:

It's a really great point. I think that payroll has had a lot of technology catching up over, we'll say, the last four years or so. Like you said, there is this bigger push to integrate in these sort of chatbots and generative AI tools. At a certain point you have to make sure that the foundation that you have laid for those tools is there first. It's better to learn to swim in the shallow end before you go diving in and integrating it in a way that you can't quite predict.

Nathan North:

Yeah. And the respondents from the survey in regards to machine learning, AI, and even robotic process automation... Most of the respondents ranked mobile employee experience as their top priority, seconded by the digital worker enabled contact center. That's more of your 24/7 virtual agents, chatbots type solutions. And then, really, third, rolling into the biometric field and looking at

time and attendance. Very interesting based off of six choices, the top three choices that came to the forefront. Eric, in your experience, what are you seeing in these areas?

Eric Hachmer:

Great question. Two things. It's very much about the experience. You touched on one, which is the mobile employee experience. Employees want that consumer grade experience. They want better access to their information, quicker answers that are more relevant to them as an individual. Organizations know that they need to provide that experience for employees to feel like, "I'm working for the right company." There's that experience. But then there's the experience within the organization, the practitioners, the other stakeholders that want work to be done differently. The digital worker is a great example.

Our friends in HR, they do amazing stuff working with employees, answering questions, providing them support, but they shouldn't be required to answer those baseline questions that technology can do instead. Finding out a data point that the employee needs, getting them a letter of employment or whatever. I mean, these are things that can be automated using AI and machine learning so that it elevates the role of a payroll or an HR professional to that cognitive level, a judgment level, to really adding value back into the experience of the employees or the level of work, the complexity of work that that person can now take on in advance [inaudible 00:14:02].

It's a mix of those two things. Either way, it's about the experience of the employee or the actual functional stakeholder.

Nathan North:

Yeah. One of the exciting things that I think came out of the pulse survey was we asked what is the primary method of working and updating large quantities of data and data sources. In the ranking on the particular question, it's great to see that, number one, we're still having spreadsheets updated automatically via SQL or similar solutions. But what came in as number two was using third party tools that receives the data and creates the dashboards and create... Whether it's Power BI or Tableau or using RPA technology actually came in number two. For once, number three is manual process, which I think is exciting in our space. I mean, absolutely.

Eric Hachmer:

A couple of things. The responses don't surprise me, but I think there's a story within that because, yes, there's still an awful lot of people that are using Excel. But that's the old days, right? The fact that there's still people struggling with Excel, but almost an equal population are saying, "You know what? I need to get to the new tools." That actually highlights a key issue in all of this longer term transformation, which is re-skilling.

Organizations not only... When you think about how we're going to elevate the payroll function, we're going to hire the best people we can, we're going to provide them with technology, and allow them to do their jobs differently. Yeah, but what about the training and the re-skilling? That, I think, is a key thing to

help them shift from using Excel to those Power BI tools, for example. What I get most excited about that is what we're seeing in real time in the market today, organizations are using those tools to tell stories in real time in a more agile way. Instead of just taking a report and everybody sees the same report, the tools now allow you to ask unstructured questions. Ask a question in simple language like you would at your kitchen table.

Instead of a VP of finance saying, "Give me a report that tells me what our car allowances are around the world and what the costs are," you say, "You know what? Show me on a map where our employees are that have car allowances. I want to see what that looks like." The technology allows you to do that today. Its ability to tell a story with agility and easily pivot to where the conversation needs to go, that's a big shift. This is an element where, again, it goes back to elevating the role of payroll, better technology, better discussions and insights that allow the business to make better decisions. It's pretty exciting. I think that the pace of this is going to just continue to move very, very fast.

Nathan North:

Guys, let's not forget being able to tell the story. It automatically equals the business to be able to make informed business decisions. They're no longer making decisions off of their thoughts and their motives. They're seeing the data and being able to make informed business decisions, which is really important in today's economy.

Eric Hachmer:

And Nathan, in real time [inaudible 00:17:03]. Because as soon as you run that Excel report, guess what? It's timestamped.

Nathan North:

It's outdated.

Eric Hachmer:

But with the technology today, you can ask a question in real time and say, "As of today, tell me what my gender pay gap is. Tell me what the ratio is of what I'm paying male versus female for the same work." Excel is fine, but I don't know when the Excel was run and how old that is. But with the tools today, you can have those conversations in a less structured way, in a real time way, so that the conversations with the stakeholders, the C-suite, and other key stakeholders are that much more impactful.

Nathan North:

Yeah. Not to mention, I think this is the first time we've really been able to give immediate data on what is the global total spend reporting. What are we spending globally? And have it in a global [inaudible 00:17:48].

Eric Hachmer:

Nina, I think either you or Nathan touched on earlier that the technology has the ability to learn. That was you, Nathan, in generative AI. The third or fourth [inaudible 00:17:55]. That's what gets really exciting, too, because every time you ask the question, it gets better at answering it, but it also predicts what question you're asking. That, again, just opens doors. It refines thinking, it gives people a way to think about the question in a different way, but it gets you to the answer that much quicker. I just think the technology, not only the pace of

the adoption is one thing, but the pace of evolution of how quickly it's going to learn to support our business decisions is going to be exciting as well.

Nathan North:

Eric, I don't want to miss. You mentioned something very important in your last answer about gender pay gaps. That was actually one of the questions that were asked and how organizations were addressing gender pay gap issues within the organizations. Off the top was standardizing of wages, no longer looking at a gender but looking at standardizing wages across the board for role-based roles. And then also coming in at a very close percentage was promoting workplace flexibility, alternative work arrangements, and then ensuring that performance reviews and promotions are unbiased.

Eric Hachmer:

Yes, this is a hot topic and it will continue to be one for quite a while for obvious reasons. For our listeners right now in the European Union, they're drafting legislation that may take effect in 2024 that will hold organizations accountable for any gender pay gaps. They'll be accountable to measure them. And if they're any more than 5% at an individual level, male, female for the same work, then they have to report on it. There is a potential that the employee can take the employer to court for lost wages. There's huge financial impacts. But what it comes down to is we're at the point now... It's not just about running a report.

We talk about Excel or giving a point in time saying, "Well, look at us. Males are only being paid 5% more than females for work. We're not that far off." It's not about the total measure; it's about the ability to get into the pockets of pay inequity within the organization, within the geographic areas, within certain types of jobs. That's where we need to be able to drill into the data to truly understand where the inequities lie that we have to address, because the challenge for most organizations is, "I got to get into the data and the analysis now, so I know where I am. I've got to make immediate near term adjustments so the problem doesn't get worse, but then I've got to continue to calibrate this going forward." That's the only way we're going to address any kind of inequity in pay, whether it be gender, cultural, or whatever. But right now, the hot topic is the gender and it's one we can address, and we need to. It's been around too long and we now have the data and the tools to provide the right answers so we can take the right actions.

Nathan North:

Yeah. Let's not forget that part of the EU legislation that they're considering is not only on hard currency, but also on RSUs, equity type programs within the organizations as well, so taking a look at both soft currency and hard currency as well,

Nina Talley:

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I really love using data to address inequality, because the numbers aren't lying. If your data's clean, the numbers aren't lying. I think that this is a really, really powerful space for, I think, these type of data algorithms to really prove their worth in society, as well as in our day-to-day jobs where it's like, "This is a problem and this is the solution." I think that's something that we've really touched on a bit here that I want to dive a little more into as we're talking about the employee experience.

I know that we've all heard a lot about the push to return to work, and I would really like to know what the data says about remote work, employee satisfaction, and how we're feeling about this return to office.

Eric Hachmer:

Yeah. A couple of things I want to react and then I'll throw it over, Nathan, to your observations. But one is, that's a nice segue from what we just talked about, because from a gender pay gap perspective, it's not just about dollars and cents but it's about programs, it's about culture, it's about enablement within the employment model to also allow people to do their best work and attract the right talent. The return to work is one of those elements. Returning to the office means different things for different people.

A couple of things that EY has identified through our Work Reimagined Survey is, A, yes, pay remains number one for employees, inflation, variety of things, obviously. But then this tension continues and it will continue between hybrid and fully remote. We're going to need to continue to be flexible, give different employees different options. But what we're finding is even in today's environment, we feel like a recession's coming. We feel like there might be a less desire to quit, to go find something else, to find a new job.

We're still finding that the balance of power is still shifting to the employee. As we think about return to office hybrid work models, how to enable our employees to do the best work, we've got to put them at the center of it, because ultimately the war for talent is out there, especially in the area of payroll and payroll professionals. If we don't get it right, we're not going to have our best talent working and being productive whether they're in the office or not.

Nathan North:

I definitely agree, Eric, with everything that you've had to say. I think one of the challenges that have come out of the idea of return to work and what we experienced during the pandemic with folks relocating sometimes to even different countries without letting their employers know, which I think had a little bit of a knee-jerk reaction right after to try to get everybody back together... Now employers are now coming around and realizing, "Okay, we have staff that are working from other locations. They want to stay there. How's that affecting us from a mobility standpoint and nexus and how are we

looking..." That was actually one of the questions that were asked, where 40% of the respondents said that they already had remote employees and they were now looking to accommodate those who wish to remain remote.

I found that really exciting that organizations are looking to accommodate folks that were remote and continue to have them be remote. I think that's also open... Coming back from a major conference last week, some of the technology that has been developed really in the last two years to really help organizations track and provide performance guidance to remote employees have just exploded. Now, of course, you have the nexus challenges that come with it, and I think companies are working very hard to develop strategies that will be both beneficial to themselves and, obviously, to the employee. But what are you seeing in your business operations?

Eric Hachmer:

A couple of things. One of them is the great resignation we were talking about that, what, 18 months ago? What we're feeling now and what we're describing it is the great rebalancing, because the elements we talked about, the war for talent, allowing people to do their best work in whatever way, finding the right way to encourage them to come back to the office and et cetera, providing the right compensation model, whether they still live in the same state as they did three years ago, that's all part of this great rebalancing.

We're finding that that's a key part of it is supporting the arrangements they already have in place, but then managing risk. You touched on that, Nathan. That's such a big thing, because if you don't get this right, if you don't understand the implications... It's complex enough at a domestic level within the US, but then think about, "Wait a minute, my Miami employee now is going to work in Spain because their family's over there or move from Spain to Luxembourg or whatever." There's so much complexity and risk attached. So, what we're finding is around the mobility discussion, organizations are not trying to figure out themselves. They're going to the experts, but they're thinking about, "How am I compliant from a taxation or regulatory standpoint? What are the implications around data security and privacy," because the rules are different across countries and geographic areas.

Nathan North:

And growing.

Eric Hachmer:

And growing, right? There's obviously the comp in bands, just maintaining that pay equity, like we were talking about earlier. Equal pay for equal work across geography. Then lastly, let's not forget the admin and HR burden, managing the visas, managing the mobile employees, the work permit, tracking days worked in different areas, all those things. We sometimes forget that there's a lot of work for the HR and payroll function to do, even if we get it right for the employee and say, "Hey, you want to move from California to Miami? Off you go. Terrific." But then there's still a lot of back office work to keep that accurate and properly managed, right?

Nathan North: I think we've all seen the explosion of the EOR, employer of record, type

companies that have really exploded over the last several years trying to help companies provide types of solutions to try to lessen that burden. But companies still have to be aware of possible nexus challenges that they still

might run into.

Eric Hachmer: The genie is out of the pot, right?

Nathan North: Yes. The genie's out. We're not stuffing that genie back in.

Eric Hachmer: Yeah.

Nina Talley: Would you like to take a deeper look at the data? You can find a link to the full

Global Payroll Pulse Survey in the show notes. Now is a time for something that we like to call payroll nightmares. This is always a highlight of the show for me. I love these stories. I think that our mistakes connect us all together and so I wanted to see... Eric, do you have a nightmare and maybe a lesson learned that

you could share with our listeners?

Eric Hachmer: Absolutely. So many directions I could go on this, but the biggest thing that I

hear about every day from organizations is the simple nightmare of, "My payroll leader just left." And it sounds a little bit, "Okay. Gosh, can you not come up with something sexier than that as a [inaudible 00:29:03]." What business are we all in? We need to get people paid and we need to get them paid on time. So when the leader leaves, you need to replace that person. You need to continue to get the people paid, rebuild the function while keeping the lights on. There's risk of the lost institutional knowledge, a lot of what's in people's heads. Not everything's on paper. And then just the company-wide impact, because as we all know in payroll, you don't get too many calls when you get the payroll right.

But if you get it wrong or late, boy, the CEO is calling you.

I think about that as a nightmare not because I think our payroll community... I mean, it's amazing. I'm impressed every day of the heroic elements of what our payroll professionals do every day to make sure that people get paid. But when leadership leaves and it creates that vacuum or your key stakeholder, it takes months to find that new leader, to optimize the model, to rebuild the culture, and while at the same time, keeping the lights on. That's a nightmare that I see almost every week. I'm talking to an organization that either is worried about that. I get calls all the time about, "Eric, I might have a problem on my hands. I might be in a bit of a pickle. What could you help us with?" It's constantly coming up and it's about the lack of talent out there. I mean, there isn't a school

for payroll professionals. They're hard to find and hard to keep.

Nathan North: Well, and also let's not forget that usually that call comes in... Half my career I

spent in consulting, it's usually 24 to 48 hours before payroll has to be

submitted.

Nina Talley: Yes.

Eric Hachmer: Yep.

Nathan North: There has to be a quick turnaround that way, again, going back to the employee

experience, where we don't create a negative employee experience. That is not always to a reflection of the payroll professional. I think that's something that's

definitely good to keep in mind.

Nina Talley: 100%. Thank you so much for that insight, Eric. I think, although losing payroll

leadership may not be the sexiest nightmare, it's certainly a very common one.

It is the teeth falling out nightmare. Everybody has had it once.

Nathan North: A good way of putting it, Nina.

Eric Hachmer: Yes, indeed.

Nina Talley: Do you want to hear how our expert guests would've handled a payroll

nightmare that you are familiar with? Send an email to podcasts@payroll.org or leave us a comment on the PayrollOrg's Facebook page to get involved in the conversation. Now, let's flip the coin. We don't really like to leave things on a

nightmarish note here.

Nathan North: Let's not.

Nina Talley: I've got one final question for the both of you. What is the best piece of career

advice that you have ever been given or what is the piece of advice that you

wish that you had been given? Nathan, why don't you start us off?

Nathan North: Network, network, network. That is the biggest lesson that I have learned. It's

easy in payroll to be in the cave for a number of years and not spend the time networking with fellow professionals and then really just understanding the resources that networking opens the door to. I would say that is by far the first and foremost. Definitely, we have the payroll community. That's a great way of

networking. Utilize the tool of networking.

Nina Talley: That's a great point and something I can always agree and back up is that if you

are kind and help people, they will be kind and help you. That is the basis of

networking. I would encourage everyone to do it.

Nathan North: Absolutely, Nina.

Nina Talley: Eric and Nathan, thank you both so much for joining us to talk about the Global

Payroll Pulse Survey. Consuming all of that data and comprehending it is really quite the undertaking. I really appreciate you both sharing your time and expertise to give us the highlights of this really, really important survey.

Nathan North: Thank you, Nina. I appreciate it and I appreciate the opportunity to join you

today.

Eric Hachmer: Yeah. It's been our pleasure. I really enjoyed it and it's great to spend some time

with Nathan, Nina. Thanks for hosting us. I'm not sure if we mentioned earlier, you probably already did, but there is an infographic that we'll share on the survey and the survey results. We're happy to take any questions. I think this is an exciting topic. There's so much going on that's exciting and interesting, and we're all on the same journey but at different points. To Nathan's point, network, network, network. Ask good questions and let's share our collective

insights and support one another.

Nina Talley: I think that's a great way to leave us is that we're all on the same journey, just at

different points. I want to thank all of our loyal listeners out there. Without you, PayTalk would not be possible. Please make sure you rate, review, and subscribe on your preferred podcast streaming service. That is the best way to support this podcast and to ensure that we can continue to bring you the human stories that make payroll so personal. Until next time, folks. This has been your host,

Nina Talley with PayTalk.

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We'll talk with you next month.