

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. Joining us today is Richard Limpkin, VP of multi-country payroll solutions at UKG Immedis.

Richard, I am so excited to have you back at PayTalk. We've talked in the past about the rapidly evolving technological landscape that surrounds global payroll operations. But today, we're really drilling down into the specific strategies that global payroll professionals can use to help their departments and themselves stand out.

Richard Limpkin:

Hi, Nina. It's great to talk to you again. I think last time we spoke, I was certainly traveling a lot so I was abroad at the time, but I'm a lot closer to home this time. Looking forward to talking to you again.

Nina Talley:

Love it. Before we get started, Richard, could you tell our listeners a little bit about your background experience in the payroll industry?

Richard Limpkin:

Yeah, of course. I suppose a little bit about me, I spent all of my life actually around technology, all the way back from building computers from parts as a kid, well before Fortnite or anything my kids are playing now. Then I took a Master's in quantum mechanics and I learned two things from that. I didn't like physics very much and it wasn't for me, but I loved the maths part of it. That was pretty much what drove me into consulting, and very quickly, I guess what I would call my first real job that wasn't working on the farm or driving a delivery van, it was really driving change in the way data's put together in the HR, workforce management and payroll space, building business intelligence layers back in the late '90s.

That's really where my fascination with payroll came through. It was really seeing very quickly that payroll's at the nexus of everything around the person. That's, I guess, what drove me to really wanting to stay in that intersection of all those different components that go into a good outcome for the person in the business.

Nina Talley:

That really ties in nicely with the first thing I wanted to ask you about, which is strategic insights and using the treasure trove of data available within payroll departments. I think it's something that is such a powerful tool for people to use. I'd love to dive into the actual deeper strategies that payroll professionals can apply once they've begun collecting the data. It's already there. What is your advice for taking stock of your payroll operations and deciding on strategy pathways for your department or for your career, based off of the data available to you?

Richard Limpkin:

Wow, that's a deep question. I guess the first part, I would say, is deciding and being really clear in the decision that you want to be a data enabled or data led business unit within an organization. There's a lot of organizations that talk about data and have access to data, but very few make the structural and the skill

based changes to fully embrace that and enable the people around the data to use it properly. I guess investment in the catalytic skills and people that can pull everything together and help you accelerate on that journey, that's really a key enabling part.

That's what helps you then make the right decisions around the infrastructure and technology that you need in place, like One View, to be able to pull that data together and making sure you make the choices in the right way, that you sequenced them properly. But you're continually developing the skills, both as an individual professional in payroll, but also augmenting teams and bringing new skillsets in to evolve how the business is working.

I would say specifically, I would say for any individual, it would be a little bit around getting comfortable playing with data. So much of what we do in payroll, having spent all of my career around payroll, is quite often there's a specific outcome or task you're trying to accomplish, but actually being comfortable playing with things more rather than being almost on a monorail approach to it, taking different paths and playing with data. There's so much data out there. If you just grab some basic data for US Census, or any publicly available information, and just starting looking at it, and playing with it, and seeing what it tells you. I think that's a really important part of how to enable any part of an organization, but particularly in payroll, to be comfortable being data led.

Nina Talley:

I want to see, are there any specific data markers that you know of that could help a payroll professional decide on various strategic pathways to pursue?

Richard Limpkin:

There's so many. In payroll, with it being almost binary in how it operates, payroll generally is right or wrong, there's one way of correctly calculating or executing. But when you think about what you're dealing with on a day-to-day basis as a payroll professional, you've got so much stuff coming at you from different systems, structures, integrations, business processes. Quite often, it's not as structured as payroll requires. The key markers for that are understanding how to get from less structured information to what payroll really needs, which is deeply structured. That's the only real way to protect against outcomes, so that's why thing like strong validation of data at the outset of a payroll cycle, preventative measures reaching upstream, rather than reactive measures after the fact are really key in that.

Nina Talley:

I want to talk about common organizational goals in a broader, global context and preparing to make an impact on those. Can you explore some specific strategies that have been effective in aligning payroll operations with those types of goals that you've seen in the past?

Richard Limpkin:

Yeah, absolutely. I would guess probably the first part, Nina, would be around almost touching back on the previous point and being data led, you need the right teams and skills in place to do that. You need also people who are able to think outside classic boundaries. Any business is structured to operate in certain business units, which ultimately become silos. When you're looking at the holistic employee experience, what we refer to as moments that matter, things that are critical to a person in their employment and have a really profound effect on how they feel about their employer, and how they interact with their employer, those business boundaries aren't always in the best place to support that. It could be the way that a particular business unit is configure, or it could be the way payroll is, the domain of what payroll is doing in a particular business is cut off and that's their remit versus another team's remit.

Having a team that can think across those boundaries and think in other teams' shoes, and think about the end outcome that you're looking for rather than the tasks you're looking to operate, that's where I've seen the most success in setting up a really effective organization to support the employees. It's really thinking a bit more laterally about what the true intersections between HR, payroll, finance are and where it best serves the outcome, not the task.

Nina Talley:

I love that. "Where it best serves the outcome, not the task." I think that is a great byline for data insights in payroll in general, truly. I want to see, do you know of a specific case where these insights directly impacted business growth, or maybe created a fundamental operational change?

Richard Limpkin:

I can think of a few, I'll go for one. I think it's key to remember that payroll, the term I would always use, it's at a really, really key nexus point in what happens next. Both in terms of where it sits in the lifecycle of employee data, but that transition from less structured to absolutely structured. In many ways, a successfully configured payroll business unit technology platform, you can be in the eye of the storm with all the craziness around you but operating well, or if not done the right way, you can almost be like the George Clooney Perfect Storm thing, with the wave coming at you. It's really getting that balance right because it's a very fine line.

I guess in all cases, payroll's that first place that the data really needs to become structured, but it's also the first place that so many different sources of information come together into one uniform dataset. If you think about, back to your question about what dimensions are important, you've got so many of them to play with in payroll.

Probably the best example of where I saw that work really, really well at helping a business evolve was around seeing mass data for the first time through deploying a truly clinical payroll solution, it means that you've got just a broader dataset to work with, but you're dealing across different jurisdictions and different economic situations as well. What I saw happen for a particular customer is it actually highlighted situations that an individual country wouldn't have stuck out enough to be noticed. It was situations where a female employee, she had been out on maternity leave once, or twice, or three times, they were substantially underpaid versus male peers, despite over years, having taken on more responsibility, and from a career perspective, overtaken in many cases, but the wage aspect hadn't caught up.

But by deploying the right tech and having the right visibility data, but also asking the right questions, so back to the outcome rather than the task. You wouldn't find anything wrong with that data from a payroll perspective. It was correctly calculated based on the inputs, and everything was legitimately and legislatively accurate. But looking at the outliers and looking at what other dimensions came into that, it then felt wrong and it told a totally different story, which could then proactively be corrected. That stuff, I find absolutely incredible when you get a really positive outcome that corrects something that just would have been undetected otherwise.

Nina Talley:

I know that that is a powerful example of what payroll data can do, but I know that ... Wow, what an unexpected human empathetic story to come of technical data and data analysis. I think that that's one of the things about payroll that I love so much, is that we can be having a conversation about data analysis and insights, but with payroll it really does come down to the humans. Everything that you're doing with it is to improve how you serve the people who are dependent on you.

Richard Limpkin:

I think that's the absolute key, Nina. It's really payroll, in most situations, in nearly all organizations, it's dealing with the biggest asset that the organization has, the people. Actually using it in a way that elevates the employee experience and gets to rights, and really for me, the substantial quantum leap for payroll is where it can get proactive and get out of a reactive motion, and do things, and provide insight and data into the wider business, that people can then take meaningful action that has an impact on the individuals, and ultimately on the business.

Nina Talley:

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I want to talk about global forecasting and financial planning for global companies. Obviously, I think payroll strategy can have a lot of impact there. But as we've talked about, for a global company, there are a lot of different aspects to optimize. What techniques or data analysis have you seen that have been applied effectively for global financial planning and forecasting?

Richard Limpkin:

Yeah. Payroll is one of the most powerful pieces of data when it comes to people aspects. Being able to combine that with other dimensions, and be able to then look at how pulling different levers in the business, whether it's a particular type of role being distributed into another geography, whether it's enhancements in certain types of role that will help the business accelerate, or just looking at getting equity across different level components of the organization. There's so much that's important there, in terms of how you can drive positive outcomes for the individuals, but also for the business.

What I find really interesting, the core techniques around this are very much aligned with what we discussed earlier, in terms of having a data led approach, but asking much broader questions. Having the skillset in the business and the team, and the technology there that can embrace that and start to look much more laterally about what we can do in a different way. Payroll is very much designed to repeat the same things, that's the very nature of what we try and do in protecting payroll, but we can keep running the same process with compliant outcomes that are highly repeatable so it doesn't naturally lend itself to asking a lot of the more evolved questions around how can we change things and that's really key. How do we turn payroll into a much more change based activity?

A lot of the new techniques around machine learning and AI are making it easier and easier to do this. They're starting to help us ask some of those questions in a much easier way, whether that's conversational reporting, but really the key is pulling in more and more data sources to give us more and more points to correlate against. That's why I love the maths part of it so much. So much of that is based on the probability of something being a possible outcome, and understanding how the probability impacts things.

But I guess, the flip side as well though is we'd need to be a little bit cautious and we see that in some of the AI models. It's very much leading edge stuff. We need to be mindful, in the payroll environment, of

making sure that we've got the right skillsets, tooling, but also the right regression mechanisms and testing infrastructure to make the repeatable stuff still a possibility when we're introducing newer and newer technologies into it. Tiny tweaks to input parameters or versions of models, or all sorts of different things can have a profoundly different outcome, such as making sure that that's rigorous in deployment of tech. It's down to having the right people and technology in place to do it. I guess a lot of organizations haven't mastered the embrace change in payroll in terms of technology, it's back to the age-old if payroll is working, don't touch anything. Keep the technology the same, don't change it.

So many organizations are falling behind by doing that and it's not a sustainable model. When you look at the type of employees that are coming into the workplace, how they want to be engaged with, and the type of mechanisms we need to get the right employee experience for them, we have to make really substantial changes in how we're embracing technology and change in payroll.

Nina Talley:

That is such an amazing point. It has been true before, but I think more than ever now, we're at a jumping off point with technology and with machine learning, and now is the time. If you haven't already begun to make the transition into being a more data led organization, it's only going to get more difficult from here.

Richard Limpkin:

Yeah, it definitely is. The nature of how people are working, how they expect to be engaged, the diversity in working populations in even the smallest organizations, there are employees in different geographies and mobility is at its highest, so it's becoming a far more complex environment. As a business leader if you're in the payroll space, HR space, finance space, you've got to make sure that you're driving the right level of innovation to support your organization and not to have barriers, either factual or tacit, that will stop people progressing the business, or just assuming we can't do that because we're not set up there, or we don't have the right infrastructure to do that. Taking those barriers away makes things so much more simplified for evolving a business.

Nina Talley:

I want to take a moment to look at the space where payroll data and HR merge. Could you elaborate on how payroll data can be leveraged to enhance global talent management strategies? What are the intersections between payroll and human resources that can provide some strategic value?

Richard Limpkin:

Yeah. I guess I have a slightly different view of HR and payroll data, in that I see them actually as part and parcel of the same thing. They're just different moments in an employee lifecycle, different components of specific moments in an employee lifecycle. I try to think of the end-to-end life of a piece of data, as it travels with the employee and what they're doing, and to not go with the classic HR, payroll, finance divide.

Because really, when you think about it, they're only constructs that businesses have created in terms of how they operate business units. Sometimes they're really helpful for an employee journey and sometimes they can be a little bit of a barrier, as data progresses with the person. I would say probably the most key part of that is to not draw the classic lines when you're thinking about data, it crosses across those boundaries. To get the holistic employee experience and journey, think about the whole thing end-to-end and not in HR, payroll silos. It really gets you alignment across the whole person data model then, so again you can pull in ... As you rightly said earlier, all those different dimensions, they can live together and you can ask all the relevant questions you need to ask at any different thing that might be happening to a person in their journey. It means that you don't have to go to different teams to get something or augment something. Bringing all of that together in a complete way, that's a really critical part of it.

That intersection, there's so many of them in the different aspects of moments that matter as they occur to an employee in their journey, but not having a technical or an almost political or organizational boundary in the way of doing it, that's really key. Because ultimately, when you think about what happens with an employee, payroll, HR data, it touches everything from the very beginning of the employee lifecycle in talent acquisition, it goes all the way through performance, and recognition and alignment, and all of that, right the way through to succession planning, being able to get effective outcomes and understand how we're modeling organization forward looking beyond the current pay cycle. All of that dataset is needed to be able to do that in a really structured way, and do it in a way that's consistent across all of your people and all of the geographies you're operating.

Nina Talley:

Before we wrap up the interview section of this episode, I want to hit you with a little bit of a wild card question. Let's say, Richard, you are transported into a payroll department of a global company. They say, "Richard, we need you to start collecting the data and providing some strategic insights off of it." Can you walk me through a little bit of that lifecycle of what you would do?

Richard Limpkin:

Yeah, absolutely. That's where tools like UKG One View are designed to do exactly that. To be able to do that rapidly in any environment is really why we brought that tool into life. An implementation lifecycle of four to six weeks to get data in platform, and to be able to then glean insights, but not just to do it in a forward-looking way, to be able to migrate historic data in at the same time.

The first key part of that is identifying where the data is currently is the obvious thing. Can we get our hands on existing data? Then the second part of that is where are we going to put that in a way that allows us to make it useful and doesn't create a huge operational burden for our organization? We want the benefit, but we don't want all the work. That's really the toolset that we need to put in essentially, around something like One View, that allows us to do it and do it in a really quick way, and a way that isn't highly technical.

That's a really important part the journey we've been on for many years, in terms of the technology we've been working with and working to deploy. It's got to be designed in a way that a non-technical user can use it. If it's overly complex, or it's hard to deploy, or it's difficult to maintain, it starts to become really a burden for the organization rather than a benefit. That simplicity in use, it gives you the time back to then ask the complicated questions in a simple way.

Nina Talley:

That's an excellent point. I think a lot of tools out there are very powerful, but they're created for the task not the outcome.

Richard Limpkin:

Yeah. Yeah, exactly that. Exactly that. We've got to make it easy. You've got to think about the teams we're trying to support, and enable, and the professionals that are there, they're people who love what they do in the payroll environment, but they're not necessarily people who have vast experience in ETL techniques for data migration and those types of activities that are often required as prerequisites to getting the right tooling in place. How do you do things that don't need that?

That's where modern technology stacks are the right thing to support that. That's where things like machine learning and AI really underpin how to make that simple for the user, take the complexity away and get to a good outcome.

Nina Talley:

I think one of the things that can be really powerful when actually trying to influence global operational shifts is telling a story with your data. How can payroll leaders be advocates for change within their organizations using these type of doing insights? Can you talk us a little bit about maybe digital storytelling and how that can be applied?

Richard Limpkin:

I love a good story. I think we do, I think it's human nature. That's how knowledge was passed on before any kind of written language, telling stories. It's almost in our genetic make up to gravitate towards that. Data really such a powerful tool in doing that, in a good and a bad way.

The simple one I would always go back to is, is the glass half empty or half full? Well, it really depends on context, and context in data is everything. If you're trying to empty the glass and if you're optimistic, then it's half empty. If you're trying to fill it and you're optimistic, then it's half full. But it just depends on the context of what it is and how we tell that story is everything. We're bombarded in daily lives by fact points that eating a nut will give 18% less chance or whatever it is that that particular nut selling organization has decided to commission a study to tell you about. It's not that I have anything against nuts, it's the only thing that first came to mind and I had some for me tea.

It's really understanding context and using that context is really important in telling that story. Getting a clear understanding of how you want to move through a story. Again, back to the outcome. What's the outcome you're trying to achieve? But then, you have to bring people on a journey as you tell that story. You need to get the right fact points that connect with them, they have to be things that are valid and relevant, and actually can stand up when other people start to investigate the same information because they will. Anyone whose intuitive, if you tell them a fact, they'll want to know, "Well, how did you get to that answer?"

My kids in school, they jump to the answer without doing the work. But then, when the question gets more complicated, they haven't done the work to be able to answer it. I think that's really important with storytelling, making sure you don't just jump to the answer and tell somebody something. You need to bring them to the outcome.

Nina Talley:

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Now is the time in our podcast for something that we like to call Payroll Nightmares, where we share stories of payroll peril. Richard, you've joined us before, but do you have another payroll nightmare to share with us today?

Richard Limpkin:

I guess the beauty of working in payroll is there's sometimes not a shortage of these. It's the nature of working somewhere where anything less than perfect is wrong means that you've always got something to work with.

Probably one I saw a while ago anyway, but it's not uncommon, I've seen this two or three times in the last number of years. It relates to a big transformational project, migration of many, many payrolls, and it involved lots of effort to bring those on board, it involved people change, systems implementation, lots of process change, integration between systems, a huge amount of prep and planning, and internal and external resources, and lots of data migration, as you'd expect in a global transformation project. But it was actually the simplest thing that stopped it at the point of go live. It was that a bank account hadn't been registered in the country we were paying from. It was something that was, "Yeah, we're fine. We're fine. Yeah, everything's fine."

It's a great example, going back to where there wasn't alignment between HR, payroll and finance. It was just where that particular business, that customer had drawn a line to say, "That bit's owned by finance, this bit's owned by payroll," and the lack of communication between the two on something so simple meant that something needed to be done today and it was a two-week turnaround to do it. There was no way to move that. The biggest plans were derailed by the smallest things.

For me, that relates back to data. It's always the key in the outliers that you're looking for. The little bits that get lost in a little the noise, but sometimes they're the most insightful things.

Nina Talley:

Data often uncovers broken processes.

Richard Limpkin:

Always, always. If there's something there.

Nina Talley:

Always. You can't hide from it.

Richard Limpkin:

You can't hide from it, exactly that.

Nina Talley:

How would you have handled this payroll nightmare? Send an email to [podcasts@payroll.org](mailto:podcasts@payroll.org) or leave us a comment on PayrollOrg's Facebook page to get involved in the conversation.

Richard, you know we don't like to leave things on a negative note here at PayTalk, so my last question is always a positive one. What is the best piece of advice you have ever been given or what's the piece of advice you wish that somebody had given you?

Richard Limpkin:

I'm going to go for a slightly different one, Nina, on this. Not so much advice, but something I've been picking up a lot of recently, reading a lot about. Everything we've talked about today, super important, but in context and relative to other things. I started reading a lot about physical health and capacity, and how it's directly correlated to lifespan and quality of life, both mentally and physically. There's a lot of thinking at the moment around how to do the right things there and how to do something now, before I need to, to try and manage that into later life. It's just something that's come up.

The reason it's become very important for me is just being aware that, to be as effective as I can be in work, I need to make sure all that other stuff is managed. Somebody said something last week, which really blew my mind. It was in a completely different context, but it linked back to this for me. He said, "You only get one spin on this Earth, so make sure it's a good one."

Nina Talley:

I agree with that. In my personal life, I'm constantly railing against cortisol, the stress hormone, and how we largely ignore the negative effects of it on our physical health and our mental health, and how it impacts everything around us. That's really key and I think not necessarily something that you think of as a piece of payroll advice. Watch your stress, keep yourself happy, it makes you a better employee, it makes you a better worker. It makes you a better payroll professional, which means that you get yelled at less when you make your one mistake a year.

Richard Limpkin:

Exactly that, yeah. Ultimately, we're all part of teams so I think being the best you can be as part of that team, it just enhances the whole experience. I think it's definitely one I've become more aware of and try and do the right things around it.

Nina Talley:

What a wonderful piece of advice to leave us with. Richard, it is always such a pleasure to chat with you. I think we have such great conversations about the nature of data and how it impacts people, and how it impacts professions, careers, lives, but that there's a lot of humanity at the core of data. I always love our chats. I know that it's providing a two-prong service to our listeners, which is it gives you a good strategy for moving forward with data insights and it gives you a good strategy for keeping the people in mind, and there's nothing more important in payroll operations. Thank you so much for your time and your expertise, and I really hope to have you back again sometime soon.

Richard Limpkin:

Brilliant. Thanks so much, Nina. It's always a pleasure. I look forward to where I'll be next time we talk. It could be somewhere different, I'm sure.

Nina Talley:

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

Speaker 1:

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