

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 Cari Breitinger, CPP, Director of HRIS and North America Payroll at BELFOR Property Restoration. Cari has had a multi-decade career in payroll and has ridden every wave of change that the industry could throw at her.

Uniquely though, Cari began her certification journey a little bit later in her career, which is why we thought she would be such a wonderful guest to join us to discuss the importance of certifications. She has a really good look at the before and after. So, I'm just really excited for her to share her insights with us. Cari, before we start, I would love it if you could introduce yourself and tell our listeners a little bit about your background in the payroll space.

Cari Breitinger:

Sure. So, as Nina said, my name is Cari Breitinger. I am the Director of HRIS and Payroll for the North America at BELFOR Property Restoration. I have been in the payroll space for 45 years now, getting ready to, we'll call it exit stage left in the next few years and have been through I think every opportunity there could possibly be thrown at me over that 45-year career.

Nina Talley:

Yeah, I can't imagine the amount of change that you've had to witness and continuously adjust and update your expertise to stay on top of.

Cari Breitinger:

It really has morphed dramatically from 1980, 1979 when I started in the payroll space. Obviously, legislation has gone a lot more complicated and tougher. States have a variety of disparate rules that you all have to be cognizant of and paying very close attention to. As we as a country evolve and we find new ways to collect some tax money and changes and make things equitable for everybody, we don't get a lot of notice in the payroll space. So, it gets a little crazy. We make our changes retroactively, unfortunately, a lot of times.

Nina Talley:

It's such a unique insight to be able to provide to us about how a lot of these very rapid feeling changes that have happened in maybe the last five years, there has been a lot of lead up to it that has been slowly tinkering away in the background. I am really honored to have somebody with your amount of expertise with us today because I think that you probably have one of the strongest insights into the nature of the evolution of payroll, given the longevity of your career and how you have managed to change your expertise as the payroll industry needed of you.

Cari Breitinger:

Yeah, it's been as we talk about very long in story and certainly exciting over the last number of years, trying to stay ahead of the game or even with the game as we talk about tax regulations changing, DOL

changes, investments changing. When I started, there was no such thing as a 401K. That was new. There was no such thing as FMLA. That was new. I remember having the Department of Labor actually visit businesses in the mid-80s to sit down with you and your leadership to talk about FMLA, actual Department of Labor representative. They did a handholding across this country to roll that out.

So, I learned from the best, the people that wrote the legislation. That's the wonderful news. Applying it though has gotten a little bit more complicated over the last 20 years.

Nina Talley:

I can imagine. I think that something that I really am curious about is I want to know the how and the why of your certification journey because obviously you have a wide breadth of experience, but you chose to pursue your payroll certification later in your career and I would just love to hear about that.

Cari Breitinger:

Yeah, so looking back at how I got to even go for the certification, the first year that Payroll Congress went virtual because of COVID, I was in a chat room with Dan Maddux. Funny story is when you're in the chat room, if there's nobody else there, you get to have really good conversations. So, I think it was Dan and myself and a handful of other people that were there at that point in time, and somehow we started talking about interior decoration of our homes because we were talking about the space. What does it look like now that everybody's working from home? We were having a good conversation about paint colors that I should be painting my living room.

His idea was black. Mine was absolutely not. But as part of that conversation, he said that he didn't notice that I had CPP after my name. Did I happen to forget it when I registered for congress? I said, "No, no, I've never gotten a certification." He asked, "Why?" I said, "Well, I've got a busy career. I've got three boys that I had to get to the point that they were in their life and a husband to take care of and work and time just didn't allow for me to-

Nina Talley:

A life.

Cari Breitinger:

Yes, time just didn't allow for me to sit down, take a class, and take a test. So, when I was thinking about, "What did I want to do next in my life?", I've been toying with the idea of going ahead and getting that certification. It's one of those bucket list ideas. But I have always thought to myself, "I've taken every class at the APA ever offered. I've taken a lot of them multiple times. I've learned through life. Thank God we have an internet and I can Google anything I want to Google. So, I know what I know." I didn't need anybody to validate my knowledge with three letters after my name. So, as we were talking through that scenario, Dan made me really think about, "Did I know what I know?"

There have been so many changes in the payroll space, whether it's again, practical application of payroll, strategic design, leadership, all of those wonderful things. Maybe just as a self-test, it would be fun just to take it. If you don't pass it, just take it. So, he challenged me before the next Congress to take the bootcamp, get in a class, take the certification test. He was absolutely confident that I would be able to pass. So, I did. So, I did. He made me really think about it.

Nina Talley:

I love that. Do you know what you know? I think that something that we talk a lot about here at PayTalk and that I talk a lot in my personal life is the ongoing pursuit of knowledge, the ongoing pursuit of education, continuing education, just finding the new way that things are being done in your field. It's so valuable. I do think that we can get to a point where we know our skills and we know our confidence level that it can be good to apply some type of challenge or goal to yourself to really see, "Do you know what you know?"

Because everything is constantly changing and payroll is one of those things that I think that you can get really, really confident at, but you absolutely always have to be returning to the education just because it's constantly changing in so many different ways and there's so many different state tax legislations and all of the different ways that the federal and then state governments come in to influence it. It seems impossible to keep up with. So, I'm personally really glad to hear that Dan gave you that challenge. It sounds like at the bare minimum, it was a good litmus test for yourself to show where you were and that you knew what you knew.

Cari Breitinger:

Right, it absolutely was. It was a great reminder once I got into the CPP Bootcamp classes that I knew what I knew, but if I haven't touched it in a number of years, things had changed.

Nina Talley:

100%.

Cari Breitinger:

So when we think about whether you take the CPP, any continuing education, if you don't actively use that memory muscle or are actively not performing that function every single day of your life, when you go back to it two or three years later, you can't rely on what you knew. Because in today's world, so much has changed.

Nina Talley:

And then there's also a certain amount that you just can't retain. There is a version of Nina somewhere out there who can read music. I can't read music anymore, but I used to be able to and it was just I stopped using the muscle and I'm unable to do it now. I have to imagine that with the levels of intricacies that go into national payroll, let alone global, Cari, I have to believe that you have forgotten more than most payroll professionals will ever learn.

Cari Breitinger:

I would agree with you. I absolutely would agree with you.

Nina Talley:

If that's the truth of the matter, then you have to go back and stir that pot just every once in a while because you've gained so much value through your career. That without going back and doing these certifications or doing this type of ongoing education, some of it you're just letting sit in the warehouse. That doesn't necessarily help anybody.

Cari Breitinger:

That's true. That's true. You never know when you'll be called upon to open that door-

Nina Talley:

Exactly, exactly.

Cari Breitinger:

... to the warehouse to let it out. So, you have to be prepared.

Nina Talley:

I love that. I think that's something that we just touched on and it's very difficult to go back to studying. Nobody really wants to do it. Then on top of it, the CPP is incredibly intimidating and we're adults. We're living lives, and many of the people who are going to get their CPP have very busy careers and kids and dogs and just so much going on. What advice do you have for anybody who's on the fence about pursuing a certification and what they can do to help them manage that load?

Cari Breitinger:

Quite honestly, I think in my world, while it was a great achievement for me at my age, I am honest with even my payroll team, going back and studying for something after having not attended any true formalized education and we're talking a college coursework, if you will, for a very long time, and prepping for an exam was overwhelming at times. So, I tell my team since I've done it, they're obviously much younger than I'm, some half my age, that starting that baseline knowledge sooner than later is important. Don't wait until you are 62, 61 to go ahead and get certified. There are so many reasons why you would want to be able to get your certification earlier on.

There's so much comprehensive information around the topic of payroll that most people just take it as granted as a learned skill because there is no formal college education degree in payroll. Everybody in payroll just fell into it. That's the rule, right? But having the validation of the certification, whether it's your FPC, Fundamental Payroll Certificate or your CPP, Certified Payroll Professional, it lets your employer and your payroll community know you're prepared to take on whatever comes your way because you get an overview of every potential opportunity that might come down the path for you. You may not have everyday living, breathing experience in stock options, for example, but you have that core memory. I remember talking about that when I got my certification.

Now my employer wants me to do something with it. I can have an intelligent conversation on what that might be. I know where to go to get some more information, and it helps you in your career building. So, whether again, it's your FPC or your CPP, you want to make sure that you have a good baseline knowledge of all the aspects of payroll and then you can put whatever those are into practical application when that time comes.

Nina Talley:

Payroll has access to a wealth of data. Are you making the most of it? Learn how to leverage analytics to transform your payroll operations and positively impact your organization's bottom line with Intermediate Payroll Analytics, the second level in PAYO's Analytics series offered through our interactive virtual platform. Continue your payroll analytics journey with the second level in PAYO's Analytics series, intermediate Payroll Analytics. Visit payroll.org/analytics2 to learn more and register. Again, that's payroll.org/analytics2 to learn more and register.

The point about getting the foundational knowledge sooner than later I think is one of those things that's really easy to overlook. Because again, if you've fallen into payroll, if there is no formal payroll education that you've received, but you're doing your job, you're doing it well, you're making great

strides for your team, there's not necessarily the push or the reasoning there, but I think that by getting in that foundational knowledge early, you make it so that you set yourself up for the career that you want. A lot of us talk about, "Oh, we fell into payroll. Nobody wants to go into payroll." I don't think that that's necessarily always true. I've met some very passionate individuals in payroll, and I personally now find it a very interesting topic.

It might just be that I've been interviewing payroll professionals for four years on it, but I find it to be very interesting. But getting that type of foundational knowledge in lets you set the pace of your own career. It lets you choose the employers that you want to. So, yes, maybe you fell into payroll, but now you can choose the organization that you want to apply to so that you can associate with them and bring in your best practices there. I think that's one of the best aspects of taking these types of certifications is that wall payroll can feel like it's a field that people fall into. Your certifications give you the ability to make it the career you want.

So, I want to talk to you a bit about your experience preparing for the CPP. I know that it's big. I believe the last time I talked about CPP, we said that the average studying time was nine months or something scary like that. So, why don't you tell me about your CPP experience and how you prepared and if there were any tools that you used to help you approach the certification?

Cari Breitinger:

Yeah, sure. So, as I said before, we took the CPP Bootcamp and we did the virtual option. I say we because we had a wonderful group of participants in that virtual experience with great teachers sharing their knowledge and preparing us for the exam. The virtual bootcamp was, I want to say, a six-month exercise, five or six month exercise, and you met once or twice a week depending on the week. You just went through all of the modules, if you will, and really covered all of the information in a shortened format that is contained in the payroll source book that's put out there by PAYO. On top of that, we were encouraged to find study groups. So, I had connected with eight other people and created our own little study group.

On a Saturday and Sunday morning for a couple of hours each week, we would go over either the module that we just talked about out of the bootcamp or perhaps a different module. We would play the games out of PayTrain and we would quiz each other. So, again, that experience lasted about six months. What was really exciting about that group of people is I made a great group of friends. We are still very connected, but as time moved on and so we roll off the actual formal education of the CPP Bootcamp, people were getting ready to take their test.

We circled around them and we would prepare Maria for a test. We would prepare for her test, whatever her issues is. It was her four-hour focus for that weekend or perhaps the weekend after whatever she needed us to do, that's what we talked about, so that she would pass the test. Then perhaps Lori was taking it the weekend after, the week after, and then four hours became her time. We would do this over and over and over trying to ensure that our core little family got through the test.

Nina Talley:

I love that approach.

Cari Breitinger:

It was wonderful. As I said, we had eight people in the group and I think six of us passed the exam.

Nina Talley:

Oh, my gosh. Congratulations to you all. That's so incredible.

Cari Breitinger:

There is a lot associated with it. It is a lot of dedication to get it done, but we talked earlier about the memory muscles. It's just repetitive. A lot of it's just repetitive. When you are in the class, the instructors will oftentimes give you hints and highlights of what got them to pass the exam. They're going to ask you... There's 11 different tests you can possibly take. When I took my test, I got this question two times, but when Susie over here took the test, she got that question eight times.

So, it gives you a reference on what is the important stuff that people have experienced and where you might want to focus. Using the knowledge assessment calculators in there and the scores, my group got really good at tracking their scores. We would take each module. Every time we took a test, we would track the score and only when we got to 100% or 90% of passing on that module did we move to the next.

Nina Talley:

Ooh, yes.

Cari Breitinger:

So we would do this back and forth, and quite honestly, I think I spent an obscene amount of hours studying for this test because I didn't want to go to Dan and say, "Well, I tried." I don't want to be that person.

Nina Talley:

You had a little extra motivation from Dan.

Cari Breitinger:

Yes, passing it, the actual taking of the test was comical. Of course, you go into the room, you take the test. Everything is very secure, and they tell you throughout your training, this is what's going to happen when you take the test. It's going to pop up and it's going to say you pass, you fail on a big screen. Then somebody's going to walk over your test scores to you or your pass or fail and you'll be on your merry way and everybody's going to pass. It's going to be wonderful. So, you finish all of your exam. I'm sitting there and I'm staring at the computer and nothing is happening. I'm thinking, "This isn't a good sign." So it flashes up on the screen, "Thank you for taking the American Payroll Association CPP certification test." I said, "Oh, well, that's not good."

Nina Talley:

That's not what's supposed to happen.

Cari Breitinger:

So I was sitting there and I was just staring at it, and then very quickly the screen flashed. When it flashed on the bottom of the screen, it simply said, "Congratulations, you passed." But it flashed within three seconds. So, I'm sitting there staring at the screen going, "Is there something else?" I'm looking for balloons, confetti, something, anything. So, I'm downtrodden. I'm like, "I didn't pass."

Nina Talley:

That's the last test.

Cari Breitinger:

I didn't even see the last message. So, I go get my scores from the gal that's running the front desk and open it up and it says on there, "Congratulations for taking the test." I just went, pulled it up, go to my car. I'm ready to call my husband in tears. I can't believe I did all that and I didn't pass. I sat in my car and I opened it up again and I re-read it. So, it took me all of that time to realize that I did pass. The first person that I called was Lori from my study group. I didn't even call my husband. I called her and again, was extremely excited.

Nina Talley:

I love that. Thank you for sharing that journey with us. It's a real full circle moment for you and I love that the end of it is a little anticlimactic, but I find that a lot of things that you prepare and prepare and prepare and work and work and work and plan and plan and plan for that then when you're done, it is always a bit anticlimactic. But I am so glad that you took the moment to re-read that, and I also probably would've called Lori first.

Cari Breitinger:

Yeah. When she passed hers, she called me and she was in tears. There were plenty of women that have that same experience. It's that rush of emotion that you go through, that relief that everything I've put into it, especially in the six-month version on the virtual side. Now there's also the in-person bootcamp that you can do. You get the same level of coursework and knowledge in your face-to-face with the instructor. So, you have that opportunity to ask immediate questions and then you are left to your own devices to go study in the night. The contemporary of mine, two of them did it that way.

I believe they went to meet in Las Vegas, and they said they didn't even get to enjoy Vegas because it was trying to take what I had shoved six months of study time and all of that into a very small window of one week to pass the exam. So, there are two ways to go through how we study and how we retain data. Doing it in seven-day sessions and you maybe have three or four hours a night to talk about the information that you covered that day and then retain it for the next day, it's a lot. I can't imagine doing it in a very short window of time. I was successful because I had the ability to do virtual.

Nina Talley:

Yes. I think it's one of those things that it's good that there's an option for both types of learners, and it's good that there's an option for somebody who is, let's say, they test well. That's probably the in-person one is probably better for people who test well, and that the virtual bootcamp is really for people who want to do what you did, which is like the data tracking of your metrics and making sure that you are as briefed on a module as possible before moving on to the next. It really is just about different learning styles, but it's wonderful to hear that there are those two different options. I think it would be hard to pay attention in Vegas though.

Cari Breitinger:

Yes.

Nina Talley:

Just a little hard.

Cari Breitinger:

Yes. To your point, the in-person is really great option for somebody that studies facts and figures, memorization. I can memorize this stuff in seven days. I can take my test. I can pass it. I am never going to take this test again. I will make sure I get all my RCHs to ensure that that never happens again and then start applying what you know. Then there's the way that I learned, and that is storyboarding, problem solving, theory. I have to go through an example in my head. Of course, we need to remember facts and figures.

We need to remember limits and excesses and rates and those things. But when we have to remember things on how to apply an entry, how to do a general ledger entry, in my mind, I can't do that through memory. I have to go through a storyboard. That's my connection, and that is where the virtual bootcamp lends itself.

Nina Talley:

Something that I wanted to touch on is how did the knowledge and skills gained from your certification translate into any real world applications of your day-to-day job responsibilities?

Cari Breitinger:

I think every day, quite honestly, every day. Again, while this certification is important, remember I have hit every PAYO class that was out there multiple times. So, again, that gave me a benefit on the CPP. I took the payroll 101 class and the payroll 201 class before there was the FBC and this CPP attached to them. So, having that background knowledge of what's coming on the CPP allowed me to do better on it than I would've thought that I would've done.

But that knowledge and skill that's gained through all of the PAYO coursework, whether it's the CPP, FBC, or any of their modules or payroll modules, it's made me as successful as what I am today in the payroll industry, not just what I'm doing today, but again in my whole payroll career as I have evolved to where I'm today. So, taking just the certification, getting that certification, it gave me more credibility immediately. My leadership said, "What is the CPP? Is it like a CPA?" I said, "Yeah, it really is. A CPA, you have to go through so much coursework. You have taken so many college-educated classes." You have to go through and you have to take... I think it's three different exams to get your full CPA. Then you have to do accounting for a period of years, and then you're a CPA.

That's no different in the CPP space. So, as soon as you see CPP after my name, you give that person some stake in the game as you would see an accountant with a CPA after their name. You're taken more seriously, right? Again, so many things that I was reminded of during the coursework allowed me to come back to my employment environment and to say, "Wow, maybe I shouldn't be doing it that way. Maybe there's a better, faster way. Have I looked at whatever the issue was from this angle?" So it reminded me of things to go back and reevaluate how the payroll department here at BELFOR was working, whether functionally as a whole or on a specific topic.

How do we process a relocation? How do we process deceased wages? When we made that decision to do it this way 20 years ago, maybe it's not the best way anymore. So, it allowed me to go back and right size if you will some of the things that we do here.

Nina Talley:

I love that. Right sizing of things is... I hope to in the future take a little bit more time with that here at PayTalk and figuring out right size technologies, right size strategies. That's such an impactful point and making sure the confidence part of it and the backing that goes with it really can't be understated and

the doors that that opens for you in your career. But is there anything maybe surprising or an unexpected benefit that you've experienced as a result of obtaining your certification?

Cari Breitinger:

Yeah, I think one thing that we want to be cognizant of out in the world, anytime you get a certification, you become more valuable, not just to your current employer, but you become more valuable to other employers or other potential employers. So, maybe not so surprising to me because I was aware of it. It just wasn't as important as maybe it should have been. People listening to this may laugh when I say this, but there's typically a pay jump when you get your certification. PAYO did a study and it looks like that if you're in the payroll manager or director space, that your income is expected to be 15% higher with the CPP than what you have today. So, there's another reason to go get that certification.

Other things are just the conversations I'm included in. We had a meeting here the other day, a casual meeting about topic not at all related to what we're talking about today. A question came up about somebody's expertise in an area, and I had the opportunity to be a keynote speaker in the industry leader speaker at virtual congress. It was a wonderful experience. We talked about my career and how I got to where I'm today in the payroll space. When it was broadcast, my leadership here felt that it was important that everybody in my building got to see that broadcast. Let me tell you, I wasn't real excited about that. So, we have a whole bunch of people there, and they're listening to this wonderful speech that I did. They go away and everybody goes about their lives.

So, I'm in this meeting earlier this week and somebody said, "So we have an expert here because we saw she knows global payroll. We saw she does this and that and this and that. She's a CPP." I was so very proud of that that was the takeaway, that they remembered that little bit of it. I don't work with them on a daily basis. I don't have payroll conversations with them. So, the fact that their takeaway was an elevated perception of me, that was truly a benefit.

Nina Talley:

Oh, yes.

Cari Breitinger:

Absolutely.

Nina Talley:

100%. I think an elevated perception, that's a really great way of putting it. When I talk about confidence, what it really is, is that you recognize that people have an elevated perception of you, which further instills your confidence in your skills. When other people look at you and say, "Well, there's an expert in the room," it makes you feel good. I'm sure that there's also somebody in your head saying, "He's wrong. You're not that good." But it's always nice to get that external validation. I think that sometimes because we're just doing our jobs, we don't see how excellent we have become. So, I'm really glad that you got that pat on the back. You deserve it.

Cari Breitinger:

I love the way that you just put that. I'm going to use that with my team.

Nina Talley:

Oh, well, thank you.

Cari Breitinger:

Because we just do our jobs, we don't realize how excellent we've become.

Nina Talley:

You're just doing your job. You're just making sure that everybody's paid. You're just doing your job, but you're excelling at it and you are operating at a level of excellence that is hard to perceive because it's you. So, now is the time in our podcast for something we like to call payroll nightmares. These are just some of my absolute favorite stories to share here, because I don't think there's anything more comforting than knowing that everybody has been in these types of just horrifying, tough, professional situations. So, Cari, do you have a nightmare and a lesson learned you can share with us?

Cari Breitinger:

I've been doing a lot of thinking about that, and I think every payroll person has plenty of nightmares at the point of time that they're a nightmare. But then when you go back and you think about, "Was it really that bad?" after you get through it, they're not always as horrible as you feel that they are at that very moment in time. But the one that sticks out for me is the same story that I was telling in the industry leader talk about how I came to BELFOR and how unimaginable it could be. Of course, you tailored it to the audience at that time and cleaned it up because there were lots of other people listening. But for every payroll person that is listening here, I am sure you're going to say, "Oh, I remember that."

But when I came to BELFOR, they had a payroll manager who was struggling. He was a good payroll manager for a very small payroll operation, not one that just came off of a merger of two very large companies together and that are disparate. One was in Denver, one was in Birmingham, Michigan. We're trying to smash them together and we're right sizing payroll departments and people are getting laid off. We are in the business of emergency services. So, you're running 24/7 crews out there, boarding up homes, sucking water where there's a flood loss. Everybody just wants paid, and you want them out there doing what they're doing. We job cost everything.

So, having to continually manage expectations from the field at the time you're trying to do system upgrades, again, figure out how I'm going to collect time from across the country, get it keyed into a system I'm not familiar with, all of these things. Payroll was just falling apart. So, that's where they engaged me to come in and see what I could do. I had the discussion with our CEO and he was extolling me all of his woes about why payroll sucked at that moment in time. He felt like he was the payroll department, and that certainly he was the head of a global construction, reconstruction house, not certainly what he should have been doing. How fast was I going to make everything stop?

I said, "Well, I'm really going to put it out there and I'm going to say six months. I don't know the system. I'm comfortable with the system. I've used it forever, but how we collect stuff, I've never done construction, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." So when you first got in here, the first thing you find out is that they don't have a good order on how to get time in the system. So, they've got three people sitting here keying 80,000 lines of data in a week.

Nina Talley:

Oh, my God.

Cari Breitinger:

That's all they do.

Nina Talley:

Oh, no.

Cari Breitinger:

There are piles of timecards all across their office. I am looking at them and I'm like, "Wow, you guys keyed all of this." I mean, stacks on the floor piled.

Nina Talley:

Wow.

Cari Breitinger:

They're like, "Yeah." I said, "You did this all this pay period?" They're like, "No, that's from three months ago." I'm like, "Well, why are they on the floor?" They're your Department of Labor documents. They had beautiful file cabinets. Nothing was in a single one of them.

Nina Talley:

It's for ambiance.

Cari Breitinger:

So very quickly, you identify that it is the disorganization of the department that was making the nightmare happen. To be in payroll, whether it is your physical space or your mental space, it has to be organized. You have to have organized thoughts. If you are surrounded by clutter, you will pick up that same piece of paper 15 times and you're wasting time. So, quickly, visually removing the disorganization let the three girls actually let out that sigh of like, "Okay, because all I keep thinking about was I've got to do all this time entry and then I got to process payroll. Then I got to go file all these piles of paper that are on the floor."

Nina Talley:

I feel like all the stacks are almost like Jaws' fin going through the water where you don't see the problem, but you're really, really tense about everything.

Cari Breitinger:

Exactly. You can't find anything and it was horrible. So, we get through putting stuff away, and of course, we're having to create manual checks. I start getting calls on week number three. I asked for a manual check for George. His hours were late. I need to get him paid. He's going to quit. I say, "But we did do a manual check for George. We did it that day." They said, "Where'd you send it?" So I looked to my payroll supervisor and say, "Where did you send the manual check?" She said, "Wherever they told me." I said, "Well, I know we do a lot of manual tax, but can you log into FedEx and tell me where you sent the manual check?" So she did, but she couldn't find it.

So, what we were doing was or what they were doing, again, I hate to put me in the middle of all of that, but they were sending manual checks on top of manual checks because they didn't know where the first manual check went to. It would eventually get to the person, but it wouldn't get their timely. So, when somebody's without a paycheck, you can't have that happen.

Nina Talley:

No.

Cari Breitinger:

Right? You need them to be engaged. You need to be out there working, especially these guys. I always say to these guys, they're crawling into your crawl spaces, doing sewer line cleanouts, boarding up fire-bombed homes, cleaning up, unfortunately, biohazards from crime scene losses, those kinds of things. Those are not the people I want to make wait for their payroll checks.

Nina Talley:

No.

Cari Breitinger:

Right. We need to get it right. We need to get it to them right the first time. So, that was my nightmare. So, quickly, again, by reorganizing their thought processes, doing better controls, instilling reconciliation. I laugh at that because I said, "So we have 1,000 hours in this system that we have to move to that system. How do you know you moved 1,000 hours?" They said, "Well, the system does that." I said, "But what you do in the balance?" She said, "Well, I run payroll and it looks right."

Nina Talley:

It looks right.

Cari Breitinger:

There's 1,200 employees. Do you check in every single one of them? So installing very basic payroll skills. We cleaned it all up in three months.

Nina Talley:

Wow.

Cari Breitinger:

Not six. Obviously, immediately all the payroll issues stopped. Crazy.

Nina Talley:

I love that. Do you want to hear how our expert guests would've handled a payroll nightmare you are familiar with? Send an email to podcast@payroll.org or leave us a comment on the PayrollOrg's Facebook page to get involved in the conversation. We don't really like to leave things on a negative note here at PayTalk. So, I have one more question for you. What is the best piece of career advice you have ever been given, or what's the piece of advice that you wish somebody had given you?

Cari Breitinger:

So one of the best pieces of advice I was given was from the CFO here at BELFOR, the gentleman that hired me. I was here I'd say maybe three, four, or five months. I was struggling with understanding culture and understanding chain of command. What authority did I have in order to fix something? What did I have to go seek guidance on? Did I have to have approvals? Trying to understand all of that.

Remember, everything was in chaos at that point in time. I'd met with him and I said, "Connor." Connor was his name. I said, "Connor, I need some advice. I have this particular problem. It is one of 10 problems that I'm trying to deal with right now, but this one has popped to the top of the priority list and I want to do this." He said, "So do that."

I said, "Well, I want to make sure you're okay with it." He said, "I don't do payroll." I said, "Well, granted, but you're a CFO. It's not just affecting payroll, it's affecting operations. I just want to make sure everybody's okay and good with it." He said, "Cari, let me ask you a question. If I hired someone who had to come to me at a manager level," because that's what I was at that time. If I hired somebody at that level manager level that had to come to me to get my approval on every decision that they made, why do I need that person? I would rather have you make a decision and be wrong 50% of the time than not make a decision at all. Because if you're wrong 50% of the time, that means you're right 50% of the time. I know we're working positively.

Nina Talley:

Yes, I love that.

Cari Breitinger:

He's not with the company any longer, but he and I chat every once in a while. I remind him of that. That was probably one of the best piece of advice is because up until then in my career, at that point, I'm 45 years old, I'm afraid to make a misstep, especially in a new position. I offer that advice to everybody. He really gave me a great way to think about things differently. Just do it unless it's going to cost the company millions dollars.

Nina Talley:

Right, but you were hired to do payroll. I don't do payroll.

Cari Breitinger:

Yeah.

Nina Talley:

It's so simple. It's lovely to hear because I know that many of us don't have that boss. It's wonderful to hear that there are those people out there who are empowering their newly hired payroll managers to make the decisions and to say, "It's okay to mess up 50% of the time as long as you're making the decision, because the other 50%, you're doing positive moves forward." So it's such a great piece of advice. Thank you so much.

Cari, thank you so much for joining us and sharing your journey and all of your experience leading up to getting your payroll certifications. I know that the CPP can be very intimidating and I know that going back to studying and to school as an adult is intimidating and then also it breaks into your day to day, which all of us have lives that we're trying to live. But I know that, Cari, you have given our listeners the insights and the tools that they need to take on this challenge. So, I'm just really thankful for your time and thank you for joining us.

Cari Breitinger:

Oh, you're very welcome. Final thought, don't wait until you're 61.

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Nina Talley:

I love that. Yeah. Now is better. But if not now, then 61 also works.

Cari Breitinger:

Right.

Nina Talley:

I just want to take a moment to think all of our loyal listeners out there. Without you, PayTalk would not be possible. So, please, please, please make sure you rate, review, and subscribe on your preferred podcast streaming service, because that is the best way to support this podcast and 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.

Speaker 1:

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