

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. Welcome to PayTalk, the podcast that brings you payroll's human side. I'm your host, Nina Talley, and today we're exploring a deeply personal and insightful journey through the payroll profession with Daniel Thompson Jr. He's an MBA, a CPP, and the AVP of Payroll Services for Bath & Body Works. So he's going to be bringing that sweet pea lotion with him as well as two decades of experience and wisdom in payroll to share with all of our listeners. And I am so excited to speak with Daniel today because he brings such a relatable and a compelling story. It's one that's about stumbling into payroll, but then seizing each opportunity for what it's worth and creating a remarkable and enriching and satisfying career. And so today we're going to be exploring a bit about finding your why in payroll and how that can transform not just your career, but your entire professional outlook. And so before we dive in, Daniel, can you share a bit about yourself and your experience in the payroll industry?

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

Thank you for that introduction first and foremost, Nina. I'm grateful that you've thought of me to be on this episode. So yeah, for me, I've been in the payroll industry about two decades at this point and I've had the great fortune of supporting a number of just large organizations, whether they be in the healthcare sector, in higher education, aerospace. My latest foray has been in retail, which is crazy and beautiful. So I've just been fortunate to see so much and really enriched by how payroll has literally just taken me around the world. So I'm just grateful for the journey that I've been on.

Nina Talley:

I love that and I think it's a really great primer for how we're going to head into this episode of where can payroll take you. So I think that many of our listeners find themselves in payroll through sort of unexpected paths and that I think relates to you as well. So what was your journey like and was there a specific moment that made you realize that payroll was the right industry for you?

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

Yeah, that's a great question. And it's funny because before I really started to network in payroll, I used to think I had a bit of a unique experience only to realize that a lot of the longer term payroll professionals that I've met, we've sort of had a similar path. So if you would've asked me 20 years ago what I thought my life would've been like, I would've told you that I was either going to end up in the IT field somewhere or in banking. Payroll was nowhere on my radar. And really what had happened through a series of events, I was working for some really large banks outside of my time in high school and really thought I was going to try to be certified to be a certified banker. Didn't really work out that way. And then I started to again dabble in the IT field.

I was pursuing my A plus certification to be a help desk tech. Went through training, loved it, but it wasn't really the thing. And so I decided I was going to just take some time away. Spent a year in Hawaii of all places. If you're going to take a year to figure out your life, there's few better places than Hawaii to figure out your life. So I'm on an island and I'm really having a bit of a crisis. I'm not even enjoying Hawaii because I'm just like, I'm wrestling with the question of I'm in my 20s, what in the world am I going to do with myself? Most people have some semblance in their young 20s, like what they think they want to do,

and I just couldn't figure it out. So after a year on the island, I come back to the mainland, I work a job in banking, short-term position, and then I happen to see an ad for payroll.

It was actually a job with Paychex, which is one of the larger payroll vendors in the country. And it was really like a level one customer service rep, come in, we'll teach you everything you need to know about payroll. And I was like, okay, well it deals with money. So that's the banking side. I really had no idea how expansive the field of payroll was until I got into the doors of a Paychex. Their training program, I laud to this day, did an amazing job really setting me up for the two decades that I've been in the industry, just teaching you everything from soup to nuts about what payroll is, but then also giving you some view into what does it mean for the different companies that you may service or you may find yourself. Because while the output is the same, the impact that payroll has within an organization will change depending on the size, depending on the industry, depending on how employee heavy or employee relations concerns around how people are being paid.

You really got to kind of understand what role does payroll play in this organization outside of just paying people. So once I got a clue into that, it really changed how I even looked at prospective jobs. I started to ask different questions around like, yeah, you need someone to come in and do payroll, but how is payroll viewed in your organization? And then, I can sort of match what I think I do well in payroll, what the organization wanted to leverage payroll to be able to report on and do, which we'll probably talk about as we go through this journey. But that was something that I clued in on really early in my career, that payroll isn't necessarily payroll organization to organization. It just has a different value depending on where you work.

Nina Talley:

That's a really wonderful point and I think that that goes into a question that I wanted to ask you, which is that oftentimes when you're getting started in payroll, that you can struggle with being seen as more than just the payroll person. And so I have to imagine that you built some strategies or at least seen some strategies that have worked about building credibility and influence within an organization and then leveraging that for your career in general.

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

Right. I mean, so it's funny, this is probably the part where I should give you five things to help you build credibility or 10 things to help your career grow. And I'm not going to do that because the reality of this situation is there are no magic five steps or 10 steps for growth in payroll. The thing that I have seen consistently work, for lack of a better term, you have to take some time as the payroll professional to understand the value that you're bringing the organization. And you have to be careful. You have to be the person to define that value and not have that value defined for you. So let me walk through what that means. Most times, you get a job in payroll, especially if you're working for a leader who has never done payroll, who's only been in the seat where they know it needs to be done; they have no idea what you're doing to make it happen.

They tend to just look at payroll as the means to an end. It's like we know we got to pay people. They're not really involved in the complexity. How did you, all of the regulatory complexity around what it takes to produce the paycheck, they don't want to be involved in that. They want you to deal with that, but it's important for you to understand that value because one of the things that you learn quickly is that yes, paying people is my end goal, but doing it right has so much downstream impact. It impacts employee engagement because when employees aren't paid correctly, it's an immediate concern. It's an immediate employee issue. If taxes aren't paid correctly, now you have a whole different set of regulatory

challenges, like people are trying to file their tax returns and the agency either has incorrect information or no information. There's downstream there.

And then just the simple fact of the economic value that you bring to an organization. Like payroll drives economies. And so doing it right, one, it puts more money in people's pocket, but it also keeps your organization from having to spend more money in unnecessary penalty and interest. So all that is to say that you have to understand as the payroll professional, all the different areas and lanes that you're touching in your role. It's not just producing the paycheck. It is all the different impacts that this paycheck has to be economy, to regulatory matters, to legal matters. You're basically playing a large role in keeping a company out of hot water and keeping the employee base happy. That's the best way. So once you understand that, how you present yourself and your work will change as a result.

Nina Talley:

Those are really, really wonderful points and I think that that is something where it is a lot about your outlook and how you want to shape things and finding opportunities. And I think that one of the, well actually, I know that one of the best times for career transformation is when there's an industry transformation that's happening as well. And so I wanted to see if you had any thoughts on what you've seen in the past as a huge industry transformation, how that affected your career, and then also if you see any parallels with what's going on currently in the industry.

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

Yeah, that's another really thoughtful question. So being in the industry 20 years at this point, technology has always been a theme in payroll for as long as I've been in it and may be for different reasons. So I'm right on the cusp of the end of a generation where payroll was widely done manually. And what that means is the time sheets were still on paper, they were calculated by hand. They may have been input into some system after the fact, but systems weren't necessarily doing all of the calculations. We were just coming upon a time when systems were really taking over the calculation piece. And so there was a lot of hesitation. There was a lot of hemming and hawing. Oh, the systems can't calculate correctly. Oh, the systems are making a lot of mistakes. There was a lot of discomfort and a lot of concern around how just that innovation around trusting the computers to calculate, like what was that going to do for career projections and outlooks? Were people going to lose their jobs? Are the machines going to take over payroll?

That's 20 years ago we were having these conversations and I think one of the things that it actually did, it did free up time for the professional to kind of concern themselves with other issues in payroll, be more of an employee-facing advocate, like getting more into employee engagement, getting more into compliance. But I think the other thing on that second piece that kind of exploded is that states' regulatory complexity just became out of control. California and Ohio specifically have always been known to have some level of complexity just because of their adherence to FLSA over time in California and the local tax regime in Ohio. Now you started to see other states that had different wrinkles, different wage, different meal and respite regulations, different final pay regulations all of a sudden. And now if you worked for an organization that was across state lines, you had to do a better job understanding the rules and complexities of the state that you're processing for.

I would say that's probably been the particular challenge over the last decade, which is why the technology, so it's really interesting conversation today as we talk about AI and big data. The technology has almost not kept up in a way that we needed it to, to keep pace with the level of change happening from the regulatory perspective. So while I hear a lot of people talking about like, oh, AI and big data is going to change, like it's going to create deficiencies in departments and people are going to lose their

jobs. I say, no, I just looked two decades ago at the same conversations. And what we have to kind of do is adapt to how can the technology make our lives easier and help us spend more time focusing on how do we produce a product that results in the most accurate pay possible and continues to keep our employers out of legal hot water.

So that's what I would say the challenges were and are. The technology is going to continue to evolve. We'll be sitting here 10 years from now, the technology will be different. The role of the payroll person is to understand we've been here before: how do we leverage this capability to make an even better outcome for associates?

Nina Talley:

Those are wonderful points, and I always like to follow up when we talk about AI that it is a tool, it's not a team member and people need to remember that. And then something that I've found myself talking about just in my personal life when it comes to using AI tools is that I've noticed that they're very good at predicting what you want to hear, but that doesn't necessarily align with what you need or what is true. And so that's really where that human aspect comes in. These are, although AI models are constantly advancing and what I'm talking about today in six months will be very different. It's always really important to remember that AI is not thinking, it's predicting and those are very different and we need the humans to think.

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

And I'm glad that you actually mentioned that because I do think that that's a part of the discomfort around AI. And the thing that you have to kind of remember is that no business is truly predictable. As long as humans are doing the work, there's always going to be some wrinkle, there's always going to be some nuance. There's always going to be something that a human intellectual brain is going to need to look at the data and bring context to the data. That context is what drives decisions. So while AI can help get to the data points faster, you'll always need someone that can look at that data and say, this is what it means. This is what happened on the manufacturing floor last month. This is the seasonal variability and why wages may be up in the fall and down in the spring. You need someone that can bring context to what's happening to the business and tell the story the numbers are presenting. So there'll always be a need for someone to do that.

Nina Talley:

That's a great, great point and I think something that we can all keep in mind whenever we're feeling a little anxious about the coming uprising by our AI overlords.

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

They're going to take over.

Nina Talley:

So talking about looking in five years, I want to hear about your journey becoming a mentor and when you're mentoring newer payroll professionals and the next guard, what do you see as the most common blind spot when you're working with newer payroll individuals, and is it anything about their career development that they're not seeing at the beginning?

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

Again, another great question. So I'm going to kind of answer this from the role of the mentor and the mentee. So as a mentor, something that I hear a lot of my mentees talk about is trying to figure out where they fit in, in an organization. They have a job, the job has a title, they have a set of expectations and roles and responsibilities, but what is the value that they're actually bringing to an organization? And if you go back a little while ago, when I talked about you can't let other people define your value, a lot of times when people give you a job and a role, they'll say your job is to process payroll. Okay, great. Do they really understand what that means? Do they really understand the impact that you're having to budgets, to employee engagement, to retention? It is your responsibility, to a degree, to know your numbers and to be able to tell the story of what you're actually doing.

Now if you're fortunate to work for a leader who has done payroll, you don't necessarily have to advocate as hard, but even in those spaces, it's important to be able to tell the story of the work that you're doing. Good example: One of the things that I find myself having to do a lot in leadership is to tell the why behind why something is needed. Why is something happening? Why are we seeing trends and retention? And granted, there are other people in HR who are probably tasked to tell a part of the story, but as a payroll professional, you have insight. You sometimes have firsthand information from people who are actually working, what are some of the things that are wrong? As an example, when people don't like their overtime calculation or they feel like the policies stink or don't work in their favor, they're going to call payroll and they're going to complain, and it's not even to report the employee engagement retention issue. It's more just to say, I don't like how this is working for me.

That's important feedback. We should never just look at it as employees complaining. This is a data point and you have to do a good job of correlating the data that comes your way, whether that's positive sentiment or negative sentiment, and be able to tell the story. This is what we're hearing from the field, this is what we're hearing people say. This is what the numbers reflect because that's the data point that a decision maker will need when they're trying to determine is something a good initiative or a bad initiative. So the young professionals, I just say, you have to kind of understand the value that you bring and the story that you're trying to tell.

As a mentor, I would say that you have to kind of understand that the way young professionals work isn't going to look the way that you've worked and it's not necessarily as important that they model your work style. It's more important that they understand your why and it's more important that they hear your struggles and it's more important that you talk as much about your failures as your success, because as a young professional, that needs to be affirmed that what they're going through isn't all that unusual. I had to hear from people who had been in payroll 10, 15, 20 years when I was just starting that a lot of the challenges I was seeing were things that they faced.

How do you know how to advocate for an initiative that's just not fair to associates? How do you have that conversation? What data points do you need to gather to make your argument or even if you know something is calculating incorrectly and you need a higher-up to sort of weigh in and help make the change, how do you communicate that? How do you prove your point? How do you demonstrate that it's wrong?

I think one of the things that mentors need to spend more time with is showing the young professional one, this is not unusual, and two, this is what has worked for me in my career. These are the things that you need to kind of focus on. It should be a knowledge transfer. We have to break this whole facade that there's this mysteriousness around payroll that the person who's been doing it has been there 30 years and they have all this knowledge that no one else has. If that's your story, you're not doing a really good job helping the next generation. You have to, whatever secrets you have, someone else should know what you know. It does the industry and the profession no good for only a few people to have all the information.

So I try to do the best that I can with my mentees. I share my successes, I share my failures even if they're recent. Even if I messed up last week, hey, I had a really big meeting. I didn't present these numbers the right way to leadership. I realized after the fact this is what I should have done. That's valuable information for a mentee. I'm trying to save you a headache. I'm trying to give you a different perspective. One final thing as a mentor, get as much from it as you give. Don't do all the talking in your mentor sessions, but listen, because what I found is that, especially the younger generation, they process information differently, but I learned so much.

I've been in the industry long enough to forget a lot, but I also learned faster, different ways to do things. I learned about new tools that are out there for processing large data sets. I just learned so much listening to how they go about their work and just what's available to them. You may in the course of your conversation, pick up something you can take to help make your life better. Even if you're still using Excel, there's a ton of tools that can integrate into Excel that just process data a whole lot faster and simpler. You just let it be a two-way conversation and not you more so dictating to them all the time. It should really be a conversation in those mentor sessions.

Nina Talley:

Those were really valuable and salient points, and I think it's probably some of the more poignant advice that I've heard about mentorships on this podcast. And I think that sometimes as you are looking for a mentor or even after you've identified the person you think should be your mentor, making that first step of the ask can be frankly intimidating. Maybe you feel embarrassed or maybe you're just not the most socially graceful person in the world. Do you have any advice for our listeners on maybe approaching a mentor and what works and what definitely doesn't?

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

What I would say is, so as someone who's been asked to be a mentor, I just appreciate the ask. I know it's intimidating because you don't know what the person is going to say, but most people who aren't overwhelmed or just jerks, most people that you ask, well one, the first emotion they're going to say, that they're honored because it is an honor for someone to want to hear your perspective, to want to hear about your journey. It's incredibly humbling and it's fulfilling. The other thing that you got to kind of keep in mind is that before you ask someone to be your mentor, know your why. Why are you selecting this person? And you may need to do a little bit of research. Don't pick a mentor solely on title. Pick a mentor on impact. Take some time to kind of understand what impact does this prospective mentor have in the organization?

What's the skill or the technique that they have demonstrated that you want to learn? Because that's going to be a part of your ask of the mentor. As an example, if there's someone in your organization that's a really, really good communicator, that's what you lead with. "Hey Craig, I've seen you in a couple of meetings. I love your communication style, not sure what it looks like for you. I would love if you had some time for me just to go over how you've developed this style and to share any tips that you may have in how I can be a better communicator." One, it's clear. We know what the terms of the mentoring relationship is. You give the person an opportunity to kind of say, "hey, well yeah, I definitely can make time to teach you." Or maybe they'll say, "hey, I really don't have the time, but here are some resources that help me along my journey. Or here's a person that I think would be even better than me to help you develop in that way."

I think making an appeal, a specific ask is key because sometimes like me, I would love to be your mentor. If you were to email me and ask me, even if you didn't know me, I'm going to say yes more times than not, just because I love to share information, but if I couldn't, I always want you to walk away with

something. If I can't do it, but you're laying out for me a specific reason why you'd wanted me to be a mentor, I can give you a wealth of resources, books that I've read, people that I follow who have been really influential to me. The goal is to leave you with something that you can use to help improve your career. So always know why. Why are you choosing this person? What have you sort of witnessed this person do or demonstrate that you want to learn to help you grow in your own career? I think that's an important part of your approach and appeal to a prospective mentor.

Nina Talley:

You don't have to take on your payroll journey alone. Being a part of PayrollOrg means having exclusive access to resources, including a network of payroll mentors. Membership in PayrollOrg helps increase your skill level through knowledge and a supportive community of peers, offering top-rated payroll conferences and seminars and a complete library of resource texts and industry recognized certifications. Other benefits include asking questions of member volunteers using ask an expert or connect directly with payroll leaders around the world for hands-on help in the open forum of the payroll community. Engage with PayrollOrg by joining a committee where you can utilize your specific knowledge and skills and much more. Invest in your payroll career and connect with more than 30,000 payroll peers worldwide and receive great discounts on PayrollOrg's leading payroll education. Join PayrollOrg today. Visit www.payroll.org to learn more.

If you are a payroll professional who has been approached by somebody asking for a mentorship and you're feeling a little maybe intimidated about the ask, it can seem like a lot of responsibility. Do you have any advice or strategies for those individuals?

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

Yeah, and I get that because the one thing that you don't want to do, and I say this to myself a bit, I don't want to ruin anybody. I don't want to give you a whole bunch of advice that you just feel is eh, not really helpful. I think the best thing that you can do as the mentor is just be yourself. Be transparent, be real, and also set boundaries. Be clear about how much time you can invest into the mentoring relationship. And if the person doesn't give you a specific ask, make it a part of that first conversation that says, "hey, I really appreciate you reaching out to me. Wanted me to be your mentor. Curious if you have specific areas you're looking to develop personally, or things that you've seen from me that you want me to kind of walk through and help you with along this mentoring relationship."

So that way you're just not... One of the things you have to be careful with in a mentoring relationship is that you're a mentor, not a counselor. They're very different. A mentor plays more of a coach and shares experience. They may give a little bit of insight on things that you could do, but unless that mentor works for this person's organization, you're not going to really understand the nuances of how things get done in that organization. But you want to be careful not to be a counselor. It is not your job to diagnose the mental condition of the person or to constantly provide pep talks and emotional reassurance. And I see that line blurred a lot. Sometimes people just, they want to call you whenever they're in need or they want to sit on your couch for an hour and complain, complain, complain. That's not a good mentoring relationship.

When you've spent an hour with me, you should feel empowered, you should feel encouraged, and you should be clear about what your next steps are in whatever it is you came to talk to me about. I unfortunately can't help you with relationship issues. I could, I mean, my undergrad is psychology, but I charge a rate for that. If you're coming to me for mentoring, I'm more than happy to share my experiences and what I've seen. And if you ask for my opinion, I'll even give you my opinion, but I'm

always going to draw a line when I feel like the conversation is creeping into emotional wellbeing or counseling related because now you've stepped over a line. More times than not, it's unintentional, but you just have to be careful as the mentor, not to blur that line.

Nina Talley:

It's really important to set strong boundaries when it comes to mentorship and mentees, and it is one of those things where it can seem not as important because it is such a fluid knowledge transfer,-

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

Yes.

Nina Talley:

But because of that, you need to be careful of maybe a false sense of intimacy that can be built and keeping that boundary and being like, no, it really is. I cannot really help you with the emotion side of it or the personal side of it. I can give you some insights as to how I have done something in the past, but that is not fully applicable here. I think that's really great advice for anybody moving forward.

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

Right. And there's a way to even approach that without coming, because I know some people will feel like, well, doesn't that make me sound like a jerk? And the answer is no. I think as a part of the conversation, you can just be very clear what the goal of the mentorship is from your perspective, and I think that helps. So that way you have a clear, like you said, boundary, but you also have a clear guideline that says, this is what the nature of our conversation is going to sound like. Happy to share. Yeah, I've missed the payroll before. Yeah, I know what it is when you feel like you have deadlines and there's a lot of pressure. More than happy to kind of talk to you about some strategies that have helped me in my career.

When people start want to get personal and they're dealing with specific employee related issues, like "I don't like so-and-so or this manager is getting on my nerves." Outside of giving strategies, like general strategies, how to deal, you don't want to get into a personal one-on-one counseling level with a person to say, "well, this is how you kind of need to Jedi mind trick them." You don't want to do that. You've already stepped over the line. It's like general high level. That's the level that the mentorship relationship needs to stay for safety for both of you, both of you and the mentee.

Nina Talley:

Completely agreed. And with this sort of gift of hindsight, when you look back at your own career and the progression of it, who were the people that really influenced your path and what made their guidance so impactful for you?

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

That's a great question. This is the part where our interview takes an emotional turn. I am incredibly grateful for, there's a number of people, and I don't want to forget anyone, but there's just been a number of people who have encouraged me, who have advocated for me, who have, for lack of a better term, done so much to move my career forward, even in closed doors, in private spaces who have just said a kind word or given a recommendation, and I'm grateful to every single one of them. I do want to call out two specific people. So one of my goals early on in payroll is that I wanted to eventually present

at Payroll Congress. Payroll Congress to the payroll professional is the Super Bowl of payroll. And as terrifying as it is to be the presenter, it was like a goal of mine. I want to one day be in a place where the committee asked me to come do a presentation for Congress.

I finally got that opportunity in 2023, and I owe a debt of gratitude to, I mean a legend in the payroll space. Someone I affectionately refer to as the PCOG or the OGPC, Payroll Congress OG Jim Medlock. Working with Jim has been one of the joys of my career. And the thing that I appreciate about Jim, anyone who's worked with him, he's a very kind individual. He's also a very hard worker. He's very detailed. You're always going to feel prepared whenever you're going into anything presentation related when it comes to Jim, and he's the kind of person that like to this day, like we presented on cryptocurrency back in 2023, which I'm sure has scared the heck out of everyone who attended like, oh my God, is this becoming a thing? Jim has been really thoughtful to just check in with me quite frequently just to see how I'm doing.

We talk a bit about crypto and all the developments around it. I just appreciate the person that he is, and I just think he has been an encouragement. He's been just a key person. As I think about this later stage of my career, just having someone like him who has seen it all and done it all, I'm grateful because the thing that people don't tell you a lot, payroll is very stressful, and one of the things that you have to kind of learn is how to manage stress. And I'm sorry to break this to you. The higher level you get in payroll, the deeper the stress gets.

Nina Talley:

Oh no.

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

And it's not even so much just like paycheck calculation. It's like you're making decisions on regulations and approaches to regulations that have impacts to thousands, if not tens of thousands of people depending on the size of your organization. So you really just want to make sure that what you're saying and doing is right, and it is stressful. I would love to say I can keep my job within the confines of nine to five. It's just not always possible at this level. So having people who have seen it all and done it all, we talk about the mentoring relationship, is key because then it helps me. Even 20 years in, it helps to talk to someone who's been in it even longer than me that says, oh, I've been through that. I've been through worse, or this is how we handled it when we went through it, when I worked in the organization years ago. It's helpful. So Jim is definitely one of the people. There's another person who is a lot less known.

Nina Talley:

I'm going to chime in here just before we move on and just say, I want to give Jim the PayTalk cosign as well because he is a wonderful guest.

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

Yes.

Nina Talley:

And what you said about he makes you feel prepared is exactly right. So thanks to friend of the podcast, Jim, you're the best.

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

Jim, for my first time presenting at Payroll Congress, if I had to do it all over again, there's no one I would rather do my first one with than Jim. He just really set me up for the rest of my career and how to prepare, how to approach it, how to be ready. He's the best. Love Jim. The second person I'm going to mention is actually from an organization that I worked with, and his name is Mark Forfard. He was a director of payroll for a large aerospace company. I'm not going to name them because they're not paying me to name them, but when I first got into leadership, so my first big leadership role, Mark was the director for the client that we were working for. And what I really appreciated about Mark is that we would just have conversations around not just best practices, but ideally if we could make the perfect payroll, what would it look like?

And he challenged me in a lot of ways to think outside of the box how I was leading people, how I was making decisions. He was a sounding board when I needed a sounding board, but he was also a big advocate for me. And I really didn't understand the importance of having someone advocate for you until I met him and I needed to be in a situation where I needed to get an initiative passed. He was the voice in the room that when everybody else wanted to say no, if they knew he was on board, he could turn a no to a yes. And it's a very powerful skill that has served me as I've now been in leadership. How do you influence a room? How do you break through even stubborn stances on a topic where people are dead set against giving you their yes. How do you win their yes?

So when I just think about the skills that have aided me in leadership, I don't know where I would've been without meeting someone like a Mark Forfard. And there's other people, there's other very influential people even outside of payroll that I've met that have all poured something into me. And so what I'll say at the end of this particular segment is this, don't take any experience for granted. Even if your career didn't start in payroll, even if you've had leaders in different industries, the people who are the most influential all pour something into you. Whether that's a word of encouragement, whether that's a way of doing something, whether that's just helping you build a sense of self and meaning and value. They all pour something into you. Don't take those contributions for granted and don't look at the value based off their title.

Look at their value based off of the impact that it's making for you. Nothing is wasted in payroll. None of your experience will ever be wasted. Like I said, you could have started from the most far off end of this whole journey where you weren't even thinking about payroll, you weren't thinking about finance, never wanted to touch money, never wanted to know anything about how payroll worked, except that you were just getting paid. That's where you could have started. And now today, find yourself in payroll. Everything that you've been through in your life will serve some value and purpose along this journey.

Nina Talley:

Yes, I love that. What a beautiful thought. So for our listeners, do you have any thoughts or questions about how your payroll career is developing or are you seeking mentorship? We want to hear from you. Join the conversation and send an email to podcasts@payroll.org.

So now is the time in our podcast for something that we like to call payroll nightmares. And this is truly one of my favorite parts of our show because I think it levels the playing field and it reassures me that yes, everyone has had one of those days. And so Daniel, I would love to hear from you about what payroll nightmare you have to share.

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

Oh my goodness. So I'm not going to say the name of the company, not that I think they would mind, but more so because I'm hoping they've forgotten about it by this point. So I was working at the time in New

York City and the company that I was working for, we had just finished an implementation. We were moving from one payroll software to another, and everything seemed like it was going according to plan. All the new pay codes had been created. We've run test checks, we know what it's going to look like on the pay stub. We verified all the taxes work. We're in a really good position. The only thing we got to do is meet this first pay date and we're good. So I leave on the Thursday double checking the project plan, making sure all of my pieces are done, making sure there's an owner attached to every other thing that needs to happen, feeling pretty good. Get to work the next day, pay Friday, and I already have messages. My phone is already lit up with messages.

Nina Talley:

Oh, no.

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

So I've developed this skill in payroll where based off how my phone is ringing, I can already tell the type of call waiting for me on the other end. And so the light is on, my phone is ringing. I'm like, oh, crap, something went wrong with payroll. So I go to sit down, pull up my email, not even checking voicemail at this point, just checking the email.

Nina Talley:

Just, I'll leave that for later.

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

And there's all these 911 emails. So-and-so didn't get paid. Is there a problem with payroll? So in all of this implementation planning, we forgot to add a step where someone verified with the bank that our bank file had processed. So that's a moment. It's like, oh, shoot. Fortunately, we had a really good relationship with the bank. We were able to at least get most of the people paid that day. They did something that was akin to what we call today, a same day ACH, where most of the people got paid. Everyone else got paid, I think by that the next day. So before we left the week and everyone got paid, but in that moment, I learned a lot about different levels of communication because how you communicate to an executive and how you communicate to an employee body needs to be different. I learned a lot about crisis management in that moment. People time their pay to bill payments, they time it to so much. That's what I mean by understanding the impact that you have in an employee's life and in their journey. It's not just about the delivery of the pay, the timeliness of it matters as much as the accuracy.

So you're getting all the emails, A, I was trying to pay my rent and I can't pay my rent because I didn't get paid. You're ruining my life. You're getting all that. So you have to learn emotional intelligence and crisis management, and then you have to just learn that you can't, I want to say you can't get too emotional, but you have to learn how to better manage those crisis emotions. Take a deep breath. This is the plan. This is what we're going to do. We're going to hit our steps. This is what we intend the outcome to be. You have to sort of go into this mindset where you can't process all of the emotions that are in the room at the moment. You have to stay focused on the task at hand. What needs to happen by when and who is going to be responsible for it?

What file do we need to get to the bank? How much time do they need to process it? How do we get verification that it's okay? You have to kind of learn how to get into that mindset, and it takes time. It takes practice. I think for me, it was a trial by fire. I'd never want people to not be paid. That's the worst feeling for any payroll professional. But if it's going to happen, you need to immediately shift into crisis

resolution. You can't get stuck in the, oh my God, I can't believe this happened. I'm ruining people. You can't. That's not helpful for,-

Nina Talley:

There's no time for a pity party.

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

There's no time for the pity party. This is the time where you basically, you show your value. It's like, okay, we missed the deadline. Not ideal. Let's communicate effectively. First, let's let people know this is a thing. We know it happened. This is what we're working on. Let leadership know. Here are the steps that we've taken to rectify it. This is what we're intending the outcome to be in, by when. And just make sure that you are the voice of reason in that crisis. It does so much for your reputation when people can look back and say, that was horrible. We missed pay, but I really appreciated how you kept everything together. You were the voice of reason and all the, there's enough emotion out there. I don't need to add to that pool of emotion. I need to add to the pool of resolution.

Nina Talley:

Ooh, don't add to the pool of emotion, add to the pool of resolution. I think that that's what we should all be taking with us in this new year.

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

Yes, yes. There's way too much emotion, not enough resolution.

Nina Talley:

So although that was a great little perk up at the end of our nightmare, we really don't like to leave things on that nightmarish note. So I generally ask one last question of all of our guests, which is, what is the best piece of professional advice that you've ever been given? Or what is the piece of advice that you wish somebody had given you?

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

That's another great question. So I didn't go to college immediately after high school. I decided to enter the workforce. So I didn't go to college until a little bit later, and I was struggling to figure out what my major was going to be as an undergrad. And I had a HR professional. He was actually a HR VP at an organization I work with, and I just asked him, he was like, "I know that you've been having conversations with people about majors and whatnot," and he was like, "Do you mind if I give you some advice?" I'm like, "Sure, whatever." And he was like, "The way I kind of see payroll going," he was like, "The systems are getting smarter and smarter to do the calculations." He was like, "What I kind of see as key for a payroll professional is to be someone who's good with people." He said, "So whatever you study, study something that's going to help you better understand people and relationship management. The systems will take care of everything else."

And I sat on that for a moment. I'm like, Hmm. Because other people are like, "Well, be an accountant. Go into finance." And I get that advice because you tend to think of payroll as a very mathematical study, but really it's about managing people, it's about understanding people, and the better you are at building and managing relationships in payroll, truly the further you can go in this industry, because the higher levels are all about understanding people, what drives them, what brings them to work, what

keeps them motivated. They're impacting our budgets, yes, but how do we keep them happy? And being able to report the data and then tell the story behind the data helps drive a lot of the initiatives that are enacted in organizations. So take some time to understand people, even if you don't want to become a psychologist, I'm not saying become a psychologist or study psychology, but take some time to learn what drives people, the people dynamic. It will really take you far in payroll and in life.

Nina Talley:

What wonderful advice to leave us with. And Daniel, I just want to say thank you so much for an engaging conversation and for sharing your journey and your insights with our listeners. Your story about building what is frankly a very meaningful career in payroll after stumbling into the field is probably one of the most relatable and invaluable stories for our listeners. I know that a lot of them are probably following a similar path, and I appreciate you sharing your anecdotes, your time, and your energy with us all.

Daniel Thompson Jr.:

Nina, I appreciate you having me. Thank you again for this opportunity and to all of payroll professionals out there, don't give up. Don't give in. Don't get stressed out. There's someone who's been through what you've been through, and if no one else will be your friend or your mentor, I'm here.

Nina Talley:

I love that. I just want to take a moment to thank all of our loyal listeners out there. Without you PayTalk would not be possible, so please make sure that you rate, review, and subscribe on your preferred podcast streaming service. That is really the best way that you can support this podcast and ensure that we can continue to bring you the human stories just like Daniel's that make payroll so personal. Until next time, folks, this has been your host, Nina Talley with PayTalk.

Speaker 1:

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