

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 payrolls' human side. I'm your host Nina Talley, and today we're joined by Lois Fried, CPP, the newest president of the American Payroll Association. Lois, thank you so much for joining us today.

Lois Fried:

Thank you for having me.

Nina Talley:

And, Lois, you were just sworn in as the APA's president. I believe at the time of this conversation, it was only just yesterday or the day before, correct?

Lois Fried:

Just a couple of days ago, yes.

Nina Talley:

Oh, wow. I have to imagine that given our current situation, it was a little bit of a special ceremony given that everybody's still under social isolation orders. Why don't you tell us a little bit about that experience?

Lois Fried:

Well, Nina, I tell you, it was a surreal experience for me. I think it would have been in person or virtual. But virtual, somehow knowing that we were actually making history at the APA was just a real exciting time. It was our very first annual business meeting and the history of the APA and also the very first swearing in of a new president in the history of the APA through a virtual environment. So, that was exciting, and I think everyone really enjoyed the experience. It went very well. And we had a larger attendance of our members showing up for an annual business meeting, which in person, there are times that we're in beautiful, exciting cities and they want to partake in all of the adventure of the hotel and everything so we don't always get as large a group in our annual business meetings as we would want.

Lois Fried:

But in the virtual environment, people were just joining in the numbers. So, that was very exciting to see. And of course my family and friends would also have been in attendance, a small number of them, if we had been in the live environment. However, I had so many more family and friends to join us at my swearing in ceremony, which just touched my heart so much to have them all there.

Nina Talley:

Well, that is certainly a silver lining to find to the virtual nature of that swearing in ceremony, is that although it maybe was not in the most lush and exotic locale, you got to share it with a lot more loved ones and colleagues than you would have necessarily. And that's incredible.

Lois Fried:

Absolutely. It was just an amazing experience and I will be basking in the feel of it for weeks to come.

Nina Talley:

Well, again from the entire PayTalk team, congratulations. We're very excited for this next chapter for the APA.

Lois Fried:

Well, thank you so very much.

Nina Talley:

So why don't you tell us a little bit about your journey to become the president of the APA? Is there any insight or anything that you could share for future members who would maybe be looking to take up the mantle?

Lois Fried:

Absolutely yes. I've had a really long relationship with the American Payroll Association, since 1985. And certainly, I felt a real responsibility to share all that I've learned from this amazing organization and to share it with others and let them know that this path that I have taken and I have succeeded in is a path that is open to any of our members who desire it. Now, I will tell them in preface that with it takes dedication and commitment, but you're surrounded by other payroll professionals that all want to see you succeed. That's why I set myself out to become president of the APA, is because I've had this long relationship with all of these wonderful people who are always your cheerleaders. They're cheering you on to continue to evolve and grow and develop your career. So all of that is in order for me.

Lois Fried:

And after more than 30 years of being a part of this organization, I just feel like I'm still learning. The APA is still evolving, so there is still more that I can share and more that I can gain. I think we always say presidents... I've heard past presidents say, "I feel like I got so much more than I gave." And I think with the APA, that's the feeling that you have. So, that opportunity is certainly open to any of our members. And what I would like to do is just really welcome the opportunity to be able to lend my leadership skills to the APA board and to our sister associations that are across the borders and really continue to bring all of the tools and resources to our membership that will help them to continue to grow and develop.

Lois Fried:

Now, there is a little bit more to that backstory because you definitely have to be committed and dedicated to the association. So one of their big first steps of course, is that you're going to be taking a look at how much time do you want to put into growing and developing with the American Payroll Association to someday see yourself becoming the president of the association? So it starts with preparation just in your own life, preparation in your job where you're going out there, stepping out to take those stretch assignments at work or joining other organizations in the human capital management

industry, and really letting your skills shine so that others can see your enthusiasm and your energy towards this organization.

Lois Fried:

So you start right with your local chapter. If you have a local chapter nearby in your city, you want to join that local chapter and start to volunteer your time. And then take a look at the national association, certainly becoming a member there where there are just so many tools and resources that are available to you. So, that's one of the first steps. I always look at that as a first step, prepping yourself years earlier to be a part of this.

Lois Fried:

Another area that you want to look at is just getting involved by joining committees of the American Payroll Association. So many taskforce forums and committees that you can be a part of where you're bringing your skills and knowledge to the table and others can see that, because that's what you want. You want to be out there so that others can see what you will be bringing to the table. So, that's really, really important. So you submit your name yet for the board of directors or for the president elect and join the speakers bureau, where we can also see that public image that you will make. It'll strengthen all of those skills right here in the training ground of your American Payroll Association.

Nina Talley:

Wow. It sounds like what you're actually saying is that it takes commitment, and really just wanting to make yourself known in the community and working with people and just continuously applying yourself towards that goal and trying to make a little bit of a ripple effect at various levels of the association.

Lois Fried:

Absolutely. And you have those opportunities so you just raise that hand and say yes, step up and say yes, because the opportunities are there. The APA is made up of a vast number of volunteers who are just committed to the industry, to the organization, and you can be a part of that. That's step one, but it's certainly not the end of your journey with the APA.

Nina Talley:

That's incredible insight, and thank you so much for sharing that with our listeners.

Lois Fried:

Thank you.

Nina Talley:

So for today's episode, we can't really avoid the topic of how the payroll industry itself is evolving in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. And I want to talk to you a little bit about how the industry is evolving, how payroll jobs are evolving, and how the culture around it are evolving, especially in response to the need for a remote accessibility. Lois, you have been a member of the APA for more than 30, and we've only been in this sort of forced isolation situation for the last few months. But what would you say are the most remarkable ways that you've actually seen the industry evolve to address these issues in such a short amount of time?

Lois Fried:

That is a very good question. I think, from where I sit, I say that the payroll departments have responded to natural and manmade disasters in many years past. So what we're looking at now is we have to still continue our operating through all of those types of natural disasters and manmade disasters. So the current event on the table for the payroll professional is COVID-19, and we will continue to operate and make sure that those employees receive their paychecks timely and accurately. And I heard just many remarkable stories out there about what companies are doing in terms of assisting and helping their employees by, if you're a parent and you have children, they're looking at ways to be able to offer you help around parental leave. That is a wonderful, wonderful thing that's happening out there.

Lois Fried:

And also making sure, and now that we have to stay in place and stay home and work from home, many employees were not yet set up to be able to handle that kind of electronic technology that's all necessary to get the job done. So, a number of employers have also provided their employees with the proper tools to be able to access remotely and work from home, which is also a very good thing. I, myself, I've been working from home prior to starting my own company. I was working from home for my employer, set up my office, and for two years I just worked beautifully right remotely from my office. So there are some seasoned workers out there that are work-from-home seasoned people out there that knew how to do it, but others certainly needed a lot of help and support. And it's very great to see employers helping out with that.

Lois Fried:

Some employers have even increase the hourly wage a bit to help offset some of the cost around having to work from home. And I really liked this one, Nina. There are CEOs that actually suspended their salary. I saw that in a writeup somewhere. It may have been in Twitter, but I thought it was a great thing to see there. They suspended their salaries to assist with savings so that they could keep the payroll going and keep employees on. So I think a lot of wonderful things are happening out there, and you can see employers and employees all coming together and unifying to work together through this process, because we know we've done it in the past and we can certainly do it now.

Nina Talley:

That's a really good point, and I think it folds well into what I wanted to ask you about next, which is, although COVID-19 and the disruption to our lives is devastating on so many levels and for so many different people, I do like to try and find a silver lining. So what would you say are the unforeseen positives that are blossoming out of this forced evolution?

Lois Fried:

I just see so many. I see the togetherness, as I said, the unity of people working together and volunteering to just step up wherever they find a problem or an issue. It's just amazing to see how the American people and people across the world that are all just coming together to assist and help out wherever they can. In the payroll industry, I think that we were set for some things and certainly not all set for everything, but just taking advantage of direct deposit and pay cards, employee portals and self service. These are areas that we put in place years and years ago, and now certainly very, very helpful to have these operations already in place and these processes ready to go. And we're resilient. I think that that's so important to take a look at that and see how we are capable of adapting where necessary, and

very quickly, because it's absolutely something that didn't wait for us. We just have to stay on top of it here.

Lois Fried:

Every day the news was changing and we were hearing different stories, so it was always this quick pivot to, what do we need to be doing next? And what is our next step to keep everything processing, keep our employees bay? And really be concerned about their paychecks arriving and getting to them on time so that they can pay their rent and buy their food. And payroll people, we know that our employees are our customers and the job of any organization is to ensure that you're giving your customers the very best service possible.

Nina Talley:

I have definitely seen that across various industries, is that there is a lot more compassion and empathy coming out, but especially in payroll, I have really seen individuals step up and take it on for themselves. I know several people are working pretty much around the clock to make sure that paychecks are still getting out and that these gaps are getting closed, because payroll people know that these aren't numbers, these are our lives. Keeping that compassion close to your heart, I think is so important more now than ever. And it's really beautiful that you're seeing that on various levels as well.

Lois Fried:

It's an amazing process that we're going through right now in transition, and I just think that we're going to come out of this on the other end just a better nation, better human beings, and I'm just looking forward to that.

Nina Talley:

I definitely agree. I think that if we can hold this sense of isolating together, that we're alone together, closer to our heart, as we move forward, it can only be a good thing. And so I would love to know, what do you think are other important lessons other than keeping that compassion and keeping that hands-on sort of reality. What are other lessons that you think that payroll professionals could take from this experience and take with them into the future?

Lois Fried:

I think that being prepared, is just prepare, prepare, prepare, communicate, communicate on a regular basis and a regular schedule. And not only with just the employees, but also with third party suppliers and risk management teams and financial services, bankers that you work closely with. That communication is going to have to really expand and be regular and frequent. And also payroll department, down through the years we've heard that bridging the gap between human resources and payroll. Well, I think this experience with the pandemic is certainly going to show a more togetherness between the human resource team and the payroll team to just make sure that our employees, all of their contact information is up-to-date and correct and accurate, working together to bring in new technology where both will benefit, from the human resource side, and also from the payroll side.

Lois Fried:

And I used to teach classes and one of the things I would do, Nina, in my classes, payroll classes, this is clients learning from my employer, coming in to learn how to use the technology, to run the payroll systems that they signed up with. And I would always say, "Show of hands, how many people have your

internal controls up-to-date?" And I would see the hands barely going up, maybe one or two out the room said, "Okay, your homework assignment. I don't give a lot of homework in class, but your homework assignment is to go back, pull out your internal controls and really take a look at them and keep them up-to-date." So I believe that after all of what we're going through now, there's going to need to be some language added in the internal controls documents for the payroll teams, the HR teams, certainly other departments and units around the organization to ensure that we're covering all of the areas there.

Lois Fried:

And also, making sure, which I'm sure a lot of organizations had plans in place for their payroll teams to be able to work remotely, but if you did not, this is certainly the time now to make sure that your payroll teams have access, all of the necessary to share drives and other documents and tools to get the job done remotely. So I'm sure that that's going to be something that will be regularly reviewed and looked at. And also, being able to respond quickly and in a pool process. There are certain rules and regulations and procedures and policies that are set in departments in the finance and accounting and payroll units. But you want to take a look at that and make sure that there's not going to be a problem if you needed to immediately get signatures to be able to [inaudible 00:18:21] quickly to a situation.

Lois Fried:

So, take a look at that to make sure that you have those rules and regs all set up, and policies and practices done well. And also, to become involved in industry organizations, if you haven't already take up the advantage. If you're a part of the APA, we are on top of getting information. As soon as we get it, we are on top of relaying and communicating that information to our members as quickly as we possibly can. So there's a resource for you right there.

Lois Fried:

However, you might also want to look at other organizations in your industry that have volunteer associations that you can become a part of so that you can stay on top of change. And always look for ways to trim the cost, because immediately the first thing we heard after the pandemic and work from home and stay at home, we heard layoffs and furloughs and work... In fact, I have to share the story with you. My son, who is a millennial, he just heard, we're watching the news and he heard the word furlough. He says, "What the heck is that? Furlough?"

Lois Fried:

So again, it gave me an opportunity to educate. And he says, "Well, how is that different from layoffs?" So I had to go through the process of explaining a layoff versus a furlough. So we had a little educational moment there, which was very good, because we're always looking at ways to, as I said, to trim cost. So the time is now. Take a look at that, see where you can trim cost. And payroll has an obligation to help out with that in the organization also. So I think all of those lessons for both mid-sized companies, large organizations, small businesses specifically, certainly need to really come up with a list of all of the areas to be more prepared, because this isn't... If, it's when this happens next time, you want to be more prepared than we were this time.

Nina Talley:

Today's episode is sponsored by rapid!, a leading provider for pay card, on-demand pay and disbursements. Knowing what comes next in today's world is more uncertain than ever. What is certain,

however, is that COVID-19 has changed the way we prepare for the unexpected. Developing a disaster plan to ensure that essential operations, including payroll, continue during catastrophic conditions has moved from, "Yeah, we'll get to that," to the top of executive agendas. rapid! can implement measures to ensure your payroll department is fully prepared should a second wave of COVID or any other health or natural disaster occur. How? The rapid! PayCard will come to your rescue in times of crisis by eliminating the need for in-person check disbursements and check mailing, enabling automatic electronic payment for employees not on direct deposit, including the unbanked, and making contact list delivery of pay possible. With rapid! PayCard, All employees can receive their pay without disruption, critical for those who are living on the financial edge, visit rapidpaycard.com to learn more about our best practices for payroll in a crisis.

Nina Talley:

Let's pretend that we have a time machine, and we can get our time machine together and we can go back six months and we can let the former president of the APA know that the global pandemic is coming and the globe is going to get shut down. Is there any silver bullet that you think the industry could have used to prepare a bit more for the pandemic?

Lois Fried:

Well, I think that they certainly had a lot of information already published and out there, and sometimes we can be in denial about something that we don't want to face or deal with. And even with natural disasters, we know that it's kind of a one-off, we go to the site wherever that natural disaster happened, we respond there very immediately and take care of that. And we're all, if it's not in our area, we're all sitting back just watching as an audience. Well, I think this pandemic that really went across the country and across the globe tells us that we cannot sit back and be comfortable and just watch the news around a situation like this for the future. So I think that we are all going to be on our best behavior around, "Let's get this on the table and let's talk about this and let's not be in denial about this happening again, because it will be happening again."

Lois Fried:

And there was a lot of information out there already. I read an article in the Harvard Business Review, that was published ironically May of 2006, that covered a lot of information around pandemics and how to prepare and what to look out for and which units in the organization really needed to step up and take charge of making sure they were communicating with the employees. And that's key thing that I pulled from that entire article, is that getting your employees prepared, educating your employees, really taking care of your employees, and something as simple as around hygiene and cleanliness in the office. That's something that we talk about, but I don't think anybody really puts a real hammer, a nail in that and say, "Everyone has to be on board here with being very clean and keep your hygiene up all around the office space."

Lois Fried:

So I think all of those, giving the employees the tools they need, giving them the education that they need, having your employees prepared will make the next time so much easier to be able to execute as needed.

Nina Talley:

I think that's a really good point, that the next pandemic it's not, if it will happen, it is when. I think that this was a really good wake-up call to a lot of us that I think we rested on our laurels due to maybe SARS and H1N1, that were concerning but then went away and you didn't necessarily need to drag out those emergency plans. And I think that this will continue to evolve the industry, it will continue to evolve job positions. It's going to change everything that we know, but I am very excited and happy to know that there's somebody like you taking up the mantle of the president of the APA, who is looking to the past, who is looking for this information that's been out since, like you said, 2006, and just adjusting it and applying it to a modern setting. I think that that is such a great well to draw from.

Lois Fried:

Very well said.

Nina Talley:

And I would love to know how you're going to take all of these lessons that we're discussing and all of this forced evolution, and how are you going to alter the position of being the president of the American Payroll Association to fit this new reality?

Lois Fried:

I will definitely be excited to work with the board of directors, to work with our executive director, Dan Maddox, and all of the members of the American Payroll Association, really accepting input and getting that input and finding ways in our organization that we can just provide more information, more education to our membership and to the organizations that they work for. Creating seminars and webinars around this pandemic and offering ways to help and support the organizations out there. So my presidency will certainly have a spotlight on that, I am sure, in many ways to coming together with our board of directors, the APA staff and our membership and coming up educational programs that will be useful and helpful back in the organization. So there'll be lots of work done around that for the next year.

Nina Talley:

Well, that's really exciting to hear, that there are some good things blossoming out of this. And I would say that accessibility is probably the biggest thing that I have seen come out of the pandemic, is that it's a forced accessibility. We have to make things more accessible across a wide range of access points.

Lois Fried:

Absolutely.

Nina Talley:

That's incredible. And I'm excited to see the work that you're going to do in the future.

Lois Fried:

We've already done just a number of wonderful, exciting things that have happened to connect with our members and employers being able to connect with their employees where are they are, because our employees are all using their mobile devices and other platforms to be able to access information, as you said, that accessibility, going to where they are. So we have to take a look at that and see where we

need to upgrade and change to be able to meet our employees where they are and meet our members where they are.

Nina Talley:

I love it. That is such an incredible message, and thank you for sharing that with us. So now is the time in our podcast for something we like to call payroll nightmares. In the future, our listeners are encouraged to send us their payroll nightmares to podcasts@americanpayroll.org. Again, that's podcast@americanpayroll.org, or you can leave us a comment on the APA's Facebook page. However, for this episode, we have asked Lois to share a nightmare from her work as a strategic payroll consultant. So, Lois, why don't you share your story with us?

Lois Fried:

I'm thinking about a story that I guess I could call it night shift. In this story, I was a product manager, assistant vice president of product manager when I was in the financial services industry. And my role there was to seek out all of the tax law changes that would be affecting the new year that was coming about. And this was some years ago, Nina. It was the year of the Tax Reform Act of 1986 that I'm sure a lot of payroll professionals would remember that. It was the federal tax overall that was happening at that time, of course. And my role was the product senior product manager of tech services, and I was heavily involved in the implementation, the editing and the proofing of the changes that needed to go into our payroll systems that were being used by our clients.

Lois Fried:

And up to that point in my career, I had only worked an eight to five shift. I didn't know about midships and graveyard shifts, midnight shifts, and all of that. I knew that they were out there, but I personally never worked one of those shifts. But because of the monumental changes taking place, I was asked to actually switch to the midnight shift for almost a week. And it's absolutely just amazing what happened here. I was working with the programmers, and these programmers all drunk a lot of Jolt Cola and coffee and they listen to a lot of heavy metal music while they were coding. So I was not in my element, let me tell you. So about the third night into this midnight shift, gosh, I just couldn't keep my eyes open. And I found an empty workstation, I turned the trashcan over on its side to make a nice pillow for myself and I crawled under the desk for a snooze.

Lois Fried:

The night shift manager, he went on a hunt searching for me and he found me under the desk taking the best nap ever. So needless to say, I never ever lived that nightmare down for years, and I am so thankful, Nina, that the iPhones were not yet available.

Nina Talley:

Yes! I love the trashcan pillow. It really makes the image for me. That was so incredible. I'm so happy that you got out of the night shift.

Lois Fried:

I am so happy myself that it was a temporary assignment.

Nina Talley:

Well, thank you for sharing that with us. I love it. I could take a little nap under my desk right now. So I have one more big question for you. It's sort of the last question of the episode that I like to leave it with. What is the best piece of payroll advice you have ever been given or a piece of advice that you wish someone had given you?

Lois Fried:

I'd have to go back to my very first job and the controller that I worked for in a controller's office in my very first job told me to think about my words and my actions. And he prefaced it with, "Always, always," and let them be my guide. So as a young professional, even then, in any job I would have had, payroll certainly as a young professional, that advice to me was priceless and I have never ever forgotten it. It always comes up in my mind when I'm in a different situation or a new situation, "Always think about your words and your actions always, and just let them be your guide." So I'm still using that priceless information to this day.

Nina Talley:

That's so beautiful and simple, and I think it's something that we can all take with us even outside of payroll. Just be mindful of your words and be mindful of your actions. It's the only way that people know how to judge you.

Lois Fried:

Absolutely.

Nina Talley:

Well, thank you so much for that. That was very touching. Before we started this episode of the podcast, Lois let me know that one of the ways that she has been dealing with isolation and helping her express herself has been with poetry, and she has offered to share a poem with us today about her experience with the pandemic.

Lois Fried:

Thank you, Nina. I'm going to share a poem that I wrote in March, probably three days after my stay in place here in the San Francisco Bay Area happened. And I have a great deck but I don't use it very often, but since I had to stay at home, I was out on my deck a lot more. So I started to look around at all the beautiful things of nature and I created this poem that I call Nature Gazing.

Lois Fried:

While sheltered in place, I gazed at the mulberry tree outside my window. It was near death last spring, but came back to life this year. The mulberry tree is said to symbolize patience, wisdom, support, survival. We, like the tree, are showing restraint, insight and unity while in battle with COVID-19. I gazed at the billowing white cumulus clouds that had gone unnoticed until now. How they dominated the sky above like soft white balls of cotton. The coronavirus, like clouds, are made up of tiny floating droplets. But unlike the cumulus, when this microscopic infectious virus turns dark and gray, sickness and death is the result. Try nature gazing while sheltered in place to ease your need to roam. Bathe your senses and the beauty of nature and stay at home.

Nina Talley:

That was beautiful. Thank you so much for sharing that with us. And I'm a little jealous of your mulberry tree, but I won't let that green envy wash over me too hard.

Lois Fried:

Thank you so much. Thank you, Nina, for agreeing to let me share this time in our lives as professionals and as human beings.

Nina Talley:

Well, thank you for sharing it with me. I think that the things that we're creating during this time are filled with sadness and love. Everything that we're feeling is out of a need to connect with one another, and I think that that is something that is beautiful, that we can hold onto in this time. And I really appreciate you sharing a little bit of your soul with us.

Lois Fried:

Thank you.

Nina Talley:

Well, that was such a perfect way to wrap our episode. Lois, thank you so much for your time and your expertise. It has been such an absolute pleasure speaking with you today. And thank you to our listeners. Without you PayTalk wouldn't be possible. Make sure you like and subscribe to us on your preferred podcast streaming service. That is the best way to support this podcast and to ensure that we can continue to bring you the human stories that make payroll so personal. Until next time, folks, this has been your host, Nina Talley, with PayTalk.

Speaker 1:

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