

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 Erin Iggy Svoboda, CPP, the Payroll Manager at Clif Bar and Company, and the owner of the most legitimately cool mullet in the entire payroll industry. If you don't believe me, look it up. I'm so excited for today's episode because we are talking about the power of visual storytelling through data. Effective storytelling is one of my biggest passions in life, and when you can drive it with validated data, that's when the professional magic starts to happen. Iggy, why don't you give our listeners a bit of your background and how you began on your journey with data-driven storytelling?

Iggy Svoboda:

Hi, Nina. Thank you. Such a pleasure to be here. Well, I quickly learned how important data is in payroll early on in my career. Anytime I needed to ask even for money just to fund the payroll, for example, the immediate question is, "Well, how much do you need?" I slowly learned from simple questions like that on how to build stories to get that point across. Hence, the art of storytelling with data became so strong for me in my payroll journey.

Nina Talley:

I love it, and we've talked about data before on this podcast and how harnessing it is the next step in developing your payroll career, but we've really only done it at a top level, and I am just in love with the idea of diving into this deeper with you. So for those of our listeners who haven't really used data in this fashion before, what do you mean when you say telling a story through data?

Iggy Svoboda:

Great question. Data itself, there's a lot it has to say, but it's not always what it has to say that comes across. You really have to give it a voice, and you start with data to figure out what's going on, but the next step is to put that in more of a visual representation, and then back that up with a narrative. So the combination of all those three things, the data itself, the visualization, and the narrative, is what creates the story. So you can't just give someone a report and hope that they figure out what you've figured out.

Iggy Svoboda:

When you look at a report and the information, the data, all the different results that are on that report, then the storyteller has a moment to decide what parts of the story are important, and that will depend on who you're talking to. So you pull that together in a visual and have your own narrative, which you can still send in an email, of course, but it's always so much more powerful when you can deliver it in person.

Nina Talley:

I completely agree with that, and there is something about just sending a report to somebody that tends to just get overlooked. So when it comes to telling a story through data, I assume that there are some

technology competencies that are required for this. What would you say are the core ones that somebody needs to at least be familiar with in order to harness this type of data?

Iggy Svoboda:

The technological competencies primarily would start with understanding the systems that hold the data. So first, you need to know how to access the data. Now, that could be simple. It could come from a form. That's the most basic method of transmitting data would be somebody penciled in a form. It's a piece of paper. It's printed out and exchanges hands. But then, there are also bigger systems that hold lots of data, and you need to understand how to run reports. Maybe even taking it a step further and learning how to develop your own reports in that system.

Iggy Svoboda:

So there's a lot of layers of technical understanding to help you access that data. If you get something in a form, you have a huge stack of forms, well, then you should be good at data entry so that you can key in the results of those forms into an Excel spreadsheet or into the system that you'll run a report from. That's the first step. Even that needs to be good because that requires accuracy. If the data entered isn't accurate, then it's no good at all. So you don't want to overlook the power of data entry and how important that is.

Nina Talley:

Excel is our king, our overlord. It kills me how simple Excel form... the need for Excel formulas really is in just moving forward with massive amounts of data. That's an excellent point, and so Excel is a great place to start, and there are tons of different Excel formulas that you can google through and find for your different needs. Are there any other technologies that you would say would be a good starting place?

Iggy Svoboda:

Yeah, absolutely. The power of running reports and learning how to build reports is also a next big layer that someone could dive into. Many report writing systems leverage something called SQL, which is a type of code that is comprised of different commands. Most reporting software will leverage SQL and these statements, if you will, to pull this information in a certain way into a report. It's pretty advanced. You could go super deep or you could go high-level, just pull in data, and then do magic in Excel, but understanding the different... What systems have reporting capabilities? How those reports can be generated? Do they have the ability to allow for custom reports, and what formats do the reports come out in?

Iggy Svoboda:

Again, going back to Excel, it really is the powerhouse for payroll professionals in all things, not just data and storytelling. But for sure, for data, it's all going to end up being the tool to organize, to scrub, to highlight, to visualize that data that's coming out of anywhere. So any reporting system should be able to export into one of the various Excel formats, but there are still many reporting systems out there, especially in the payroll world, that only output information in a PDF, and that makes it hard.

Iggy Svoboda:

So another tool to consider would be a PDF converter. There are these amazing tools. There's lots of different services. It does cost a fee, but of course, if you're in a business, it may not be material for the business to cover this fee. That is a tool that will just comb through the PDF and extract the data into the format you need it to be in. So it could be in Word, but we're talking about Excel here, and it could pull different numbers and data into Excel format for you.

Nina Talley:

I am a huge PDF converter fan. I don't know how I lived before, and it seems like such a silly specialized tool, but it will save you so much time, so much heartache. I love that.

Iggy Svoboda:

Absolutely, and there's a lot of old legacy payroll tools that still are running and calculating payroll that only offer reports in PDF. Yeah. It's a small, but very powerful tool that's available these days.

Nina Talley:

I just wanted to circle back to... You mentioned the programming language SQL. For anybody who wants to do a little bit of research for themselves on that, that is spelled S-Q-L. There are lots of courses on Udemy, Khan Academy, lots of things like that that can give you a rough and dirty go of it, so you can start getting started with your SQL knowledge. So now that we've talked a little bit about the technologies that you need to at least be aware of or competent with, let's talk about where it gets really interesting and powerful. What do you think are the data points that absolutely have to be monitored for payroll?

Iggy Svoboda:

Oh, that's a great question, and I think it's going to vary depending on the business and what kind of payroll you're operating in. Some of the more obvious ones, which are still important and probably what most people are familiar with would be things like overtime, headcount, change data like statuses, compensation, and addresses, and then even the cost of payroll and errors. Those are some very obvious, more frequently talked about examples of data to look at and stories that could exist, but there are still a lot of other transactions that happen within payroll.

Iggy Svoboda:

For me and the operation I'm currently in, some of those non-obvious points of data I like to look at evolve around accounting transactions, all the different accounting requirements, and journal entries. They seem to be growing in numbers, and I like to see, what are they? Why are they happening? Where are they coming from? How many are there? Another big one for this year is compliance, and how many compliance rules have changed? What are their impact in cost and time to administer? What does that look like this year versus last year?

Iggy Svoboda:

The biggest thing is more of a general statement that I really like to take a look at is, what are those changes that are coming in that the business makes that unknowingly create payroll expenses? Things like remote work or expense reimbursements that really should have been taxable, or the big one that I've been researching a lot this last year are around gross-ups, whether or not they really help, or do they really cost more expenses in the long run? Those are some non-obvious things.

Iggy Svoboda:

For each payroll operation, I'm sure there are things that come to mind that make you go, "Huh, I wonder. How much is that really costing us?" or, "How much time does that really take?" or maybe you've asked yourself, "If I only could put a number on this or could tell a story of this, I could get the resource or tool I need." Those are the things that are worth taking time to dig into.

Nina Talley:

Data is so powerful, and it's just about harnessing it, and utilizing it, and proving your point. That's my favorite thing about data is that it's truly about proving your point.

Iggy Svoboda:

Oh, absolutely. I love proving I'm right. It's my favorite.

Nina Talley:

And you've got the numbers to back you up.

Iggy Svoboda:

That's right. Who can challenge it?

Nina Talley:

So with that in mind, and we talked a little bit about it, but what do you think is probably one of the most surprising optimizations that you found as a result from your work.

Iggy Svoboda:

Well, I was mentioning the accounting transactions before, and I didn't expect to get what I asked for. So I was pleasantly surprised I did, and that ask was to get a dedicated payroll accountant resourced on the team to dive into these accounting transactions. I was surprised because I would ask this in the past through my career. But in retrospect, I realized the reason that I was able to get the resource I needed was because I put together the story. I pulled a list of all the accounts that we had to monitor and manage.

Iggy Svoboda:

I was able to put a time on how much it took to get each one of those done, and I was able to prove based on the timing of when we were able to reconcile and perform accounting views that we were stuck in a reactive mode and not proactive, and that if we wanted to have better control over payroll expenses and actually use them as insights to make decisions, we need a dedicated expert resource to stay on top of those accounts. From that story that I was able to share, I got that resource approved. It surprised me because it seemed like, "Oh, this might be extra. This might be perceived as extra," but it wasn't. They were on the same page with me because I was finally able to tell an effective story.

Nina Talley:

What a wonderful anecdote of the actual power of data is that you then use the data to make your job easier. What a wonderful thing that we could all hope for is that the needle on our side, the bad part of our day, you were able to resolve that through data. That's incredible, and I'm so happy for you. It does

tie in with something else that I wanted to ask you about, which is no man is an island. So what internal teams do you need to get buy-in from in order to start leveraging this data?

Iggy Svoboda:

That's a great segue because for obtaining such a resource in accounting, I definitely had to spend a lot of time with accounting as an example. Engaging the different departments, they could help in many ways, and that's... One example is that they could help justify and validate the data that I pull together. So I'll continue to play on with this example. When I was looking at our accounts, and the number of accounts we had, and how long it was taking to work on them, and what the expectations would be from the financial statements, I went to the Accounting Department and the people that I work with closely on those matters to have them take a look at what I've measured and what my conclusions were from the results of the data and my measurements. They were able to provide insights that supported my measures, or maybe even altered them, and in many cases, raised the needle up even higher as to why I needed that resource.

Iggy Svoboda:

Through that partnership with them, it got them very interested in what I was doing and gave them a lot of insights into how I was treating the accounts, or how I was making them a priority or not able to make them a priority in that case. I created a really great bond with them. Through that exercise alone, even if I didn't get the resource, I felt more equipped, more knowledgeable, and more supported just through the process of sharing what I've collected. There are, of course, other layers and other aspects of partnering with different departments because a lot of times, you actually need to liaise with other groups to collect data.

Iggy Svoboda:

We all know we've learned that from the AP a numerous times over how important it is to hang out with our accounts payable friends and understand what payments do they make to employees. We need to be able to scrub through that and determine, "Is there anything taxable in there?" Well, that's easier said than done. It's important to have a good relationship with your friends in AP. It's important to understand, "What systems are they using? How could they report on that data? How could they give me a report of that data? Then, how do we make a story out of that?"

Iggy Svoboda:

You'd still have to partner with them, even after you get the data, to take a look at what's going on, and have them help you understand, "What is this? Why did you reimburse this? I don't understand what this is from this explanation." Together, you may write a novel on expense reimbursements. It may not be something you do on your own, and having that partnership involved in the data collection and in the story make that story that much more powerful.

Nina Talley:

I completely agree, and I think another great example of how data empowers people. It doesn't just have to be you as the payroll professional that is benefiting from it. You can look at how payroll is affecting accounts payable, and try and see how you can solve issues for them as well so that then they want to help you create those relationships. I think one thing that no matter what the topic is that we're discussing each month, I seem to keep coming back to two things, which is data and networking, that if you can harvest the data, and then you can leverage it through your network, that's truly where the

power sits as a payroll professional. You need to build these relationships, and you need to do it ahead of time, so that when it comes down to it and you're ready to push these initiatives, you already have a little bit of buy-in.

Iggy Svoboda:

Absolutely, and one of the things that this is probably raising up for our listeners and also comes to my mind that I struggle with is, who's got the time for all this? Right? That's the conundrum like, "Oh, this sounds good, but how do I make the time for it?" This is, again, also where storytelling becomes quite powerful because we need to invest in this. In order for us payroll professionals to be a strategic partner with the business, we need to make time to gather, assess, visualize, and speak to what's happening in payroll because so much happens in payroll. We're the closest expert to it. So we need to take the time to figure out how to compile it and express this to those who are not experts. That's the challenge. So get buy-in to get support, and making the time would be a good first step to tackling any of this.

Nina Talley:

Such an insightful point. I think that a lot of times, people are like, "Well, payroll is not HR, so I don't have to deal with the human part of it." But truly, it's a very human thing to ensure payment going out to employees. It's very personal, and trying to exist in a world where payroll is just numbers is no longer functional.

Iggy Svoboda:

That is a thing of the past.

Nina Talley:

It is a thing of the past. When it comes to some of these numbers though, and like you said, different people consume things differently, different people find different aspects engaging, how do you make some of these dry data a little bit more engaging for those who aren't so number-driven? What are some tips and tricks for that?

Iggy Svoboda:

The best place to start, as they always say in show business, is know your audience. You have to. This gets back to your comment about how this is... There are strong relationships and networking here. It is where you start. 100%. So if you got a request from someone that needs a report, oftentimes, someone will say, "I need a report of X, Y, and Z." Then, someone in the payroll team may just pull it together and spit it out. Well, instead of that, when someone asks for some information like a basic report, take a moment to say, "What is it you're looking to find? What are the key takeaways you need to discover from this report? How would you like this report displayed?"

Iggy Svoboda:

Get an idea of what the audience is after. Then, once you get the data, take a look at it from that lens. You as the payroll professional know more about that data than your audience, so you have to be their proxy with their intentions in mind, but with your expertise to pull out those things they're looking for, and present it in a non-technical way that's going to make sense to them. A really good example is when you pull a report or you are looking at a pay stub. There is a very technical name for something like SUI.

But to someone not in payroll, they have no idea what SUI means. So a simple translation of an acronym or even simpler, saying, "That's an employer pay tax." Dumbing it down even to that level.

Iggy Svoboda:

I say dumbing. That's insulting. We don't want to look at it that way because there's no wrong way. There is no mistake for not knowing. It is not bad to not know. We just need to know where to meet that person, and it's hard for us as professionals when we've been doing it for 10, 20, 30-plus years. SUI is ingrained in us, but we have to remember to take it back to day one when we didn't know. That will help to prepare the data in a way of telling a story that's going to resonate.

Nina Talley:

That's such a beautiful point. I am a huge advocate for communicating with people in their own language, and sometimes that's taken as dumbing it down, but that is truly inaccurate. We're all raised in different cultures with different idioms and different words that resonate with us in particular. I think that making sure to think about who your audience is, think about the tone, think about your existing relationship, and just framing things through that is how to build more powerful relationships and how to build trust. By doing a simple thing like asking, "What are you trying to accomplish with this report?" you're then facilitating them through that and building trust, and you're saying, "I am invested in you succeeding." In turn, they will also invest in you succeeding.

Iggy Svoboda:

I love the way you said that. That is so true. Absolutely, and that is the heart of a relationship. So in essence, you really can't tell a good story unless you have a good relationship with your audience.

Nina Talley:

I love it. Invest in each other's success, and you'll go far.

Iggy Svoboda:

That's right.

Nina Talley:

To be a powerfully productive business, you need powerfully happy people. Two leaders in workforce management and HR have joined forces to become UKG, Ultimate Kronos Group. UKG creates comprehensive HR solutions designed to make employees happier and build more meaningful connections within your workforce. They've even done that for themselves, being recognized as one of the top places to work, and UKG's 12,000 employees help thousands of businesses build better cultures every day. When you're ready to make your people happier, UKG is ready to work for you. UKG, their purpose is people.

Nina Talley:

I would really like to dig in with you on that thought of how technology is shifting the payroll landscape and how the profession will change over the next 10 years. What do you think payroll professionals will be able to really focus on once data automation has managed to knock out some of the paperwork?

Iggy Svoboda:

I think the future of a payroll professional will be, for lack of a better word, more technical. It's not keying in numbers, and validating numbers, and reconciling numbers, which all takes great care, and I do not mean to belittle that in any way. It's so important, but that redundant, detailed task, when that's automated, that leaves the payroll professional to become the role of auditor, the role of validation, the role of ensuring accuracy, which is what all payroll professionals want. They want to be 100% accurate and perfect.

Iggy Svoboda:

This is where the art of data automation can be an asset to the payroll professional in that if they have the system crunching on the tedious, time-consuming data entry, and that system is able to move it and process it not only a lot faster, but more accurately, then the payroll professional, their role will be reviewing what happened in the payroll and being essentially another pair of eyes that's evaluating the result before transmitting. But without that, there's so much time spent repairing that the review and validation is cut short. In fact, often, we don't even get to do it. We just hope we did the best we did in creating the data and entering the data that we'll just check it out after the fact, which may lead to a paycheck correction or something that has to be fixed later.

Iggy Svoboda:

So this is the power of data automation and how the payroll professional role will shift when using something like that. It becomes a strategic role. It becomes an analytical syncing role, and that could be scary for some because it is nice. I reflect back on those days of just entering timecards. You go in, you enter your timecards. You don't have to stress, and worry, and fret about the politics or about figuring out a problem. You just get the info, you enter the info, and you go home for the day. You don't have to worry, and I absolutely appreciate it, but the payroll professional role will be so much more advanced that we have to taken on those burdens.

Iggy Svoboda:

That's going to be what's required of the payroll professional, and that's going to be a hard shift I think for a lot of people who weren't ready for that level of profession because we didn't go to college for this. We set out to seek this. We figured out this was going to be our career by accident, so many of us. So the future of the payroll professional is going to be so much more intentional. I think that the education and the career path is going to be more important and recognized as being important, and even one day, I hope that payroll will even be its own department.

Nina Talley:

I completely agree with that, and I think it's such a shame that often, when it comes to the reports and it comes to the actual validation of the data, the review and the validation is often overlooked, and that's really where... It's something that Max and I discussed in our last episode. That's where the operational highs exist. If we can cut out a lot of the noise and allow payroll professionals to really showcase their work through the visual ability to tell a story through data, that's where those operational highs sit. You can really bask in the glory of a job well done when you have numbers to back you up.

Iggy Svoboda:

Oh gosh. Yes, absolutely. As you were saying that, I was just reflecting on how many payroll professionals I've met over the years, and including myself, how often we've said, "If they only did it this way, this would make it so much better. It's so bad, and it's so inaccurate because of X, Y, and Z." With

data automation and the future of payroll, I think there will be more time and more opportunities to actually step in and make those improvements, not just hope one day it will get figured out.

Nina Talley:

So now is the time in our podcast for something we like to call Payroll Nightmares. We ask our listeners to send us their payroll nightmares to podcasts@americanpayroll.org or you can leave us a comment on the APA's Facebook page. But for this month's episode, Iggy has a nightmare for us on something that is a little bit too much of an uncomfortable reality right now, and it's how layoffs can affect you. So, Iggy, why don't you share your nightmare with our listeners?

Iggy Svoboda:

Absolutely. Thinking about it really brought back those emotions, and it was from so long ago. It was from back in 2008 when the economy was taking a dive at that time. I feel that emotion as if it was today. Unfortunately, this emotion might be something a lot of people are feeling today. The firm that I was working for at the time in 2008 had no choice but to lay off almost a third of their workforce. Even before that happened, in fact, that year before 2008, there was such an increase in their workforce that our payroll team was already way too small, way understaffed for the multi-state, multi-country complexity it required. So entering the layoffs, there was a moment I thought, "Okay. Well, maybe we won't be overstaffed." But what I realized was processing those layoffs required hundreds and hundreds of off-cycle payments almost every day for a month.

Iggy Svoboda:

After that, it did trickle off. But through that whole month, I was working over 12 hours every single day and even on weekends to get every single one of those checks done. After I get done with one day, the next day, there'd be a whole new stack to do. That stress of the work to get that done, unknowing what I was going to come into the next day, and the fear that my job could be next really had me spiraling out into a state of depression. I'm not one that's really been riddled with depression. I really was quite alarmed by that emotion I was feeling. It was just overwhelming. I didn't know how to get up and get to work the next day, although I managed to.

Iggy Svoboda:

In hindsight, I look back on that now, of course, with more experience under my belt since then. Looking back on that, I realized one of the things I didn't do was ask for help. I felt like it was just expected of me, that I just had to suck it up and do what I needed to do because I was worried if I asked for help that I was going to be ridiculed and potentially to let go myself. But really, I should have. I should have asked for help. I should have just taken a moment to take a deep breath, acknowledge my emotion, and go talk to my boss, or even maybe my boss's boss if they weren't around to express that this is... The way that the layoffs are coming in are making it difficult to complete the work in a work day or within a reasonable time, that the amount of time I had to work, including weekends, I wasn't able to get it done.

Iggy Svoboda:

If I was able to collaborate better in coordinating when to execute the timing of the layoff or if we had enough time between when they decided and when to cut the checks, if I was a part of those conversations and was able to help coordinate the layoffs better, maybe I wouldn't have been so overburdened. So I learned that I need to not be afraid, and as long as I'm coming at my ask without emotion, then I should have no worry of what I'm asking. The worst they could say is, "No, we can't do

that," and then I just have to carry on my way. But if I don't ask, I know for sure that I'm not going to be in a good place.

Nina Talley:

So I have one final question for you. What is the best piece of payroll advice you have ever been given, or what's the piece of payroll advice that you wish somebody had given to you?

Iggy Svoboda:

Well, there are so many moments of advice that I've got and advice I wish I got. I could list a whole novel on it, but the one thing that really stood out for me. I have to take it all the way back to the beginning when I was 19 and I was working for a small business. I finished high school. I moved out of the house. I wasn't in college, and the small business was really struggling. In fact, I got to the point where my paycheck was not clearing. So I called a friend I had met previously on another job who I knew was a really good accountant, and I asked her to help this business because I needed my paycheck to clear. I didn't know what was going on.

Iggy Svoboda:

She said to me I should quit that job. That business is going under, and instead, I should apply for a payroll clerk position with her daughter. She said I'd get a steady income. I wouldn't have any fear about losing my job, and I'd be set up for a solid career path. I was a little skeptical because I was like, "Uh, payroll? I don't know. I don't know if I want that baggage." I already knew there was a lot of baggage tied with payroll, but I thought, "Why not? Let me check it out." I went, and I didn't do well in the interview, but because I had this friend as my referral, her daughter accepted me pretty much even though she thought she had some red flags. Fortunately, it ended up being the best thing for me. Here I am still a payroll professional doing so many really exciting things in payroll. I will never forget that advice, and I'm so grateful that that was the best advice I've ever been given.

Nina Talley:

That's something that I spoke with Max about in our last episode is that payroll offers not just stability, but also, an opportunity to really explore various aspects of your interest. Maybe you want to be more technical. Maybe you want to be more hands-on with people. You can explore all of these different things and through so many different corporate opportunities. Everybody has a payroll department, and they likely need a sharp mind like Iggy's come and help them out.

Nina Talley:

Well, thank you so much, Iggy, for joining us today. It has been an absolute pleasure, and thank you for sharing your time, and your amazing attitude, and your expertise with us. I also want to say thanks to our listeners. Without you, PayTalk would not be possible. Make sure you like and subscribe to us on your preferred podcast streaming service. That's 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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