

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 Cyndi Karapogosian, District President at global talent solutions and business consulting firm, Robert Half. Before we get started, Cyndi, I'd love it if you could introduce yourself and tell our listeners a little bit about your background and what you do in the professional talent services space.

Cyndi Karapogos...: Perfect. Thank you so much, Nina, and thank you for allowing me to be part of this podcast today. So my role, I am the District President and I oversee a very large portion of our market, Southern California, Arizona, Nevada, and Utah, for all of our professional staffing lines, including contract placement and direct hire in our finance and accounting space and in our administrative and customer service space. And as we're talking about payroll, my geography this year has placed 6,200 people this year to date, so we have a lot of payroll. So this is a perfect opportunity for us to chat about.

Nina Talley: I love that. And for our last episode of the year, we are looking to the future and discussing the ways to best prepare yourself and your career to take the next step as a payroll leader. This might mean taking your first steps as a payroll supervisor or manager, or maybe making the big leap to being a director or a vice president. But either way, Cyndi has insights that will help you make yourself an ideal leader in the payroll space. I think an excellent place to start this conversation is with your own leadership journey, Cyndi.

Cyndi Karapogos...: And that's such a great question. When I think about my leadership and how I built my skills throughout the decades, I would say, first and foremost, I would say that I really listened to others quite a bit. I listened and watched how other leaders comported themselves in environments and people that I admired and I wanted to emulate. The second thing that I really did was I listened a lot and I've always taken the approach, our good friend Stephen Covey, How to Win Friends and Influence People, and his philosophy on First Seek to Understand then be Understood, I think is a critical thing from a leadership perspective. And the third thing I would say is that as leaders, you need to be a person that individuals want to follow. No longer the thought of there's clearly a difference between being a manager and a leader, and I will say that as a leader, people get to vote you off the island sometimes. So you have to be somebody that people want to work for, work with.

Nina Talley: I think that's such a really great point, specifically there at the end about needing to be somebody that people want to follow if you're going to lead, but I loved that overview of how to build those types of skills in your actual career. I think that's a wonderful anecdote for people to understand because sometimes

making that big leap can seem a little amorphous, how do I do it? How do I make those changes? And it's a couple of really critical fundamental things, and it's about focusing on yourself. And so were there any relationships or networks that you think really helped you along the way to become a leader?

Cyndi Karapogos...: I think all of our networks are very vast, and oftentimes we don't think of what the entirety of our network is in my history. So I've been in my particular industry for a little over two decades, but I started off as a recruiting manager and I worked my way up throughout many different roles of increasing responsibility into the position that I'm in. And when you think about the relationships or when I think about the relationships that helped me along the way, I thought about my peer group, individuals that I saw were doing a very good job at different aspects that I could tap into.

I thought about in the industry, in general, and I kept relationships with people in other companies that were in our same space, so I could ask them questions on challenges that they would have. I think, now we have LinkedIn, and LinkedIn obviously is a great place to go to. There are many networking groups within LinkedIn that I think are extremely helpful. And when you're thinking about payroll professionals, clearly the APA is a great place. Not necessarily a plug, but yeah, it's a plug because it's an incredible place where you have a community of people that are doing the exact same job where when you have challenges or you have questions, you easily can go to this vast network of people and pick their brains, and I know that they would be willing to help.

Nina Talley: That really is a wonderful point is always the APA is an incredible tool, an incredible service, an incredible community that, honestly, we here at PayTalk think that everybody should be looking into. And I believe that most of our listeners are looking into at least some of the services within the APA. But I think that reminding us all to look back on our careers and continue to nurture that network, don't just let things wither because you're not specifically in that space anymore or with that specific company anymore. The network that you build along the way is a ladder and you can't get rid of those bottom rungs, you still need them, and you still need those people in your life to help you look into different avenues. And with leadership in particular, I think that there's no reinventing the wheel, but there's always a new process to find, a new way to make people take pride in their work and take pride in their leadership as well, and using your network for that is such a valuable tool.

Cyndi Karapogos...: So true.

Nina Talley: And we talked a little bit about the leadership skills that you developed in your own career, but what are some of the top leadership skills that payroll professionals need today?

Cyndi Karapogos...: The world has changed without question, and I would say one of the very first skills that is critically important as you become a leader is what I would consider

having a high EQ, emotional quotient. Understanding people, because people really are, that's what makes your business run and it's very important that you put people first. The second thing that I would say is proactive thinking. So constantly looking at what you're responsible for and asking yourself, what can I do to make things better or more streamlined? And along with that, being a creative solution-oriented person, so really identifying where there might be problems, and again, being proactive at coming up with potential solutions. I would also add, ask yourself, are you an active listener? We all have two ears and one mouth.

But when you're listening to challenges or questions or concerns, come from the point of view of are you listening to respond or are you listening to understand? And there's a critical difference there. And really becoming an active listener to understand where the other person is coming from or where the challenges reside. Last but not least, the new world is all about collaboration. So understanding who the stakeholders are within your organization or who could be affected by decisions that you make, and gathering input in advance and really being collaborative with those individuals and with other departments. All of those things, to me, are probably the key skills for payroll professionals.

Nina Talley: I think that's really true, and I also think it's something that we come back to. This is the payroll people's podcast, it's where we constantly return to the idea that payroll is about people and it's about the people behind the scenes running it, but it's also about the people that you're serving. And like you said, having that emotional intelligence that means that you're actively listening, and then pairing that with creative problem solving, that is what makes a true payroll leader in today's workforce, is being flexible, realizing that everything is in flux right now and you need to be as well, and making sure that you're putting your people first. People will recognize just the inherent leadership in those actions.

Cyndi Karapogos...: No question.

Nina Talley: So how can payroll professionals acquire leadership skills for the next stage of their careers? Where can they get this sort of training?

Cyndi Karapogos...: I would start by saying, although it's not necessarily required, different certifications such as the CPP, Certified Payroll Professional, and the FPC are good things to think about, which obviously the APA can help in terms of preparing and studying for, so that's something. I also would just encourage people to identify opportunities and just lifelong learning skills in professional development, period, because it's not only are you a good payroll professional, do you know how to handle payroll? Do you know how to handle the questions or concerns or challenges? But also, how can you lead people?

So thinking about some of the different books that are out there, there's many that, I'm sitting here next to my bookshelf and I've got probably 50 books that I've read over the years that, on occasion, I always refer back to. And there's

also other organizations out there, frankly, such as Robert Half, and we have a partnership here, but there are different organizations out there that offer employees, whether they're contract or full-time professionals, training. And we have a training called Percipio where you can go online and you can not only update hard skills, but soft skills as well. So there are many different places you can go to acquire different leadership skills in, frankly, any step of your career.

Speaker 4: Savvy payroll job seekers that employers know that salary is a key negotiating tool. Are you making salary your competitive advantage? Whether you're seeking new payroll jobs or recruiting the best payroll professionals, the Robert Half 2023 Salary Guide gives you the numbers you need to know. Visit roberthalf.com and get up to date salary data for all positions and regions. Learn how flexible work options are reshaping the workplace and discover how to have smarter salary discussions no matter where you're sitting at the table. Get all the numbers worth knowing today. Visit roberthalf.com and scroll down to get the salary guide.

Nina Talley: It also ties back to what we were talking about before with your network and ask your network, what are some of the skills that are working really well for you and how did you acquire them? I think that because things are in such a transitional phase with the world also being in a transitional phase where it's we're done talking about the new normal, now it's just normal, but things are still sort of shifting, and figuring out what it's working for the other people working in your industry.

There are solutions out there for you. Find the people that you respect within your network and ask them, hey, are there any new skills that you picked up that you think would be helpful for me? Have those conversations. And I think it's one of those things that you can often sort of sleep on a little bit if only because a lot of those conversations can happen after hours, and I know a lot of us like to shut that computer at the end of the day and be done, but I think that if you're looking to be a leader, it means taking a firmer grasp of your career and the direction of it and doing a little bit of extra legwork.

Cyndi Karapogos...: I would agree with that, and I might add, always being curious.

Nina Talley: Yes.

Cyndi Karapogos...: Constantly thinking about what else, what else, what else? I always use the term what would make the boat go faster?

Nina Talley: Yes, I love that.

Cyndi Karapogos...: What are some things that we can create to be a little bit more efficient or just 1% better every day?

Nina Talley: And it's how can you make your job better? How can you make your employees jobs better? How can you make vendor processing easier so your vendors are happier with you? There's a million different ways that it can be applied.

Cyndi Karapogos...: Absolutely.

Nina Talley: So I think that something that a lot of us know and that it's always a little uncomfortable to talk about is that how you sell yourself is an important aspect of being seen as a leader. It's not just about skills, it's about presentation. So how should payroll professionals word their leadership skills? And word both their soft and hard skills on their resumes or online profiles like LinkedIn, what do employers want to see and how can they frame skills to fit that?

Cyndi Karapogos...: Yeah, that's a really great question because as payroll professionals, you're not professional resume writers. And one of the tips I would always give somebody that is looking to sell their background and sell their leadership skills is highlight results rather than what you did functionally, highlight the results that you had. Highlight your team's results and specify, maybe something that you did to create, a process that became more efficient for the organization, maybe how you saved the company money or time or, in the payroll space, turnover, how maybe you and your team were able to not only save time or save money, but have you done something that actually possibly generated revenue for one reason or another, or allowed more revenue to come through the door. So all of these things are really important and the way that you position them is not only what you did personally, but how you led your team. How did you lead your team, and how did you get them to create those results?

Nina Talley: That's a wonderful way of framing it. And I think that in a lot of past episodes we've talked about data and I love talking about data, and I think that data's so powerful in the payroll space. And if you have clean data, it can really show what you're doing in your department. So even if you're not writing your resume right now and you're not really concerned about data as to how you're improving processes at your job, maybe go through once a quarter, collect data on improvements, anything that has to do with turnovers or money generation, as Cyndi said, is so powerful. And if you have that data to back it up, that's a good resume if I've ever heard of one.

Cyndi Karapogos...: Absolutely. And that's what will set you apart from everybody else, is those actual results. And I think that that is a piece that often people miss is just taking a moment of time every now and then to reflect on what you and your team have accomplished and articulate that and put it in, to your point, in data, dollars and cents, what was the actual achievement or what was the actual result?

Nina Talley: That's a wonderful point. And I know that we've definitely already touched on how the professional world and the payroll space is in flux right now, and it's all

rapidly shifting. But with that in mind, what leadership skills do you predict will be in demand in 2023?

Cyndi Karapogos...: Well, no question, 2023 and beyond, I think number one is agility and adaptability. What we've learned over the last couple of years is change is happening and it's happening so quickly and you don't know what's going to be around the corner. So being able to be very agile and very adaptable is going to be critical for any leadership role in the future. The other couple of items that I would say is being a visionary, somebody who is bold and is not afraid to get outside of their comfort zone. Be open-minded and think about maybe not what has been done, but what is possible. And collaborating with others and being very curious so that you can... Every company is looking for people that want to make the organization better.

So if you have that mindset of how can I make things better each and every day, that is a critical skillset. And then I'll go back to the one that we've talked about before, which is that high EQ, that emotional quotient, knowing that we all deal with people. And in the payroll industry, you are dealing with probably the most important thing in somebody's life, which is their money. And so really understanding what challenges people might have and how you can help them is, I think, very important.

Nina Talley: I agree with all those points. And while we're talking about an industry that's in flux, mentioning that you need to be adaptable as well. I think is so important to remind us all that if you're not willing to bend right now, the industry will break you. Nobody wants to be broken. So stay flexible and not just in the way that you're willing to flex with the industry, but stay flexible in the way that you're approaching solutions. There's no reason to reinvent the wheel, but if something is not optimizing your life and there's a way to optimize it, just consider it. Talk with your team, see how you can implement it. And I think that it's those steps and those proactive steps that really help set a leader apart on a team.

Cyndi Karapogos...: Agreed.

Nina Talley: As the exclusive talent solutions partner of the American Payroll Association, Robert Half provides discounts on services to APA members. So if you are looking to hire, whether for a contract or permanent role, check out the last section on the career advancements page on APA's website at americanpayroll.org for info on the discount program and how to take advantage of it. And if you are not yet an APA member but would like to become one, Robert Half is pleased to cover your membership enrollment fee, just use promo code R-H-I-A-P-A-1 when you sign up at americanpayroll.org. Again, that promo code is R-H-I-A-P-A-1 when you sign up at americanpayroll.org. So now is the time in our podcast for something we like to call payroll nightmares. These are always some of my favorite stories to share because I really don't think there's anything more comforting than knowing that

literally everyone has been in a tough professional situation. We're not alone. Cyndi, do you have a nightmare and a lesson learned that you can share with our listeners?

Cyndi Karapogos...: Well, actually it was hard for me just to find one because I've had more than one, as many people probably have had. But yes, I reflect on one that I think was a really important learning lesson. So I'll share the situation. This was an internal person that I had hired in our organization, and I literally had spent 10 years recruiting this person to come to our organization. So think about that, 10 years to bring this person on board. And he's a senior level individual within my geography. And sometimes senior level people, their compensation plans are unique. They can be a bit complicated. And this person, when he started, his bonus plan was not entered into the system appropriately and it took him, unfortunately, a while to figure out that there was a piece of his compensation that was missing.

Nina Talley: Wow.

Cyndi Karapogos...: Yeah. It took about six months for him to realize that a piece of the compensation was missing. He came to me and was very frustrated. And once again, somebody's pay is the most important thing to them as an individual. So you never mess around with somebody's pay. So we identified this issue and I had brought it to the administrative professionals person, person who entered the information into the plan, but also the payroll department, and we did get it fixed. We got it worked out. But what I will tell you is that, to me, there was a big learning lesson from that because he didn't look at his compensation plan, he didn't look at his payroll stub on a regular basis until it was a big problem. And then big problems take more time to solve. So one of the lessons that I learned from that is to make sure that anybody that has a payroll question, we are looking at their compensation plan and we're looking at their paychecks early on regularly and explaining to them how to read their paycheck and how to read their compensation plan.

Nina Talley: Yes.

Cyndi Karapogos...: Because it happens when somebody's new to the organization and they just don't understand. So that's something that we've implemented kind of moving forward with all of our hires, to make sure that early on that their manager directly sits down with the person more than once and shows them how to read their payroll stub, shows them how to read their compensation plan so that if any questions do arise, we get to them early. Because in this situation, had we not been able to fix it, wow, I mean, I could have risk losing somebody that took me 10 years to get. Everybody's good, everybody's happy. We got to the other end of it, but it certainly was a learning situation.

Nina Talley: I think that that is a surprisingly common nightmare. I don't think that a lot of people understand how important their pay stub is and making sure that it's

accurate. And I couldn't imagine losing that candidate or that person after 10 years of work for something that silly.

Cyndi Karapogos...: Yes, agreed.

Nina Talley: Do you want to hear how our expert guest would've handled the payroll nightmare that you're familiar with? Send an email to podcasts@americanpayroll.org or leave us a comment on the APA's Facebook page to get involved in the conversation. And because we don't like to leave things on a negative note here at PayTalk, I have one more question for you, Cyndi. What is the best piece of career advice you have ever been given? Or what's the piece of advice that you wish somebody had given you?

Cyndi Karapogos...: I think about this a lot, and there are a lot of pieces of advice that I would probably give, but the one that I think was most impactful to me earlier in my career, that I have taken with me and I share this often with people. Especially in payroll, but just in general, people can get frustrated and maybe somebody does something that you don't like or becomes an obstacle for you, and sometimes people can derail their careers as a result of not handling a situation. So the piece of advice that I got early on was this, don't ever let one situation or one person derail your career. It's a moment in time, and this too shall pass. So that is something that I say to people all the time, if they're in a situation where they're frustrated or they feel like they stepped in the wrong role, or they may have to look at a different opportunity, all of those things. So that would be my one piece of advice that I received, and now I give.

Nina Talley: I love that. I have something that I sort of live by that is similar, which is always take the high road, you'll never regret it. You will never regret taking the high road.

Cyndi Karapogos...: Yes.

Nina Talley: And I think that folds in really well with them. So thank you so much for sharing that advice with our listeners, Cyndi.

There's no doubt that payroll is a crucial business function. After all, payroll is the reason people come to work. But in this age of digital transformation and big data, payroll is a strategic asset that can be leveraged to improve the overall business strategy, employee experience, and the organization's financial wellbeing. The data that payroll is responsible for drives business results across the entire organization. Today, every payroll staff member is accountable for understanding and interpreting that data. That's why the American Payroll Association's Foundations of Payroll Analytics is a must-attend course for payroll professionals who want to ensure their seat at the table and participate in planning business strategy. Demonstrate dynamic leadership, leverage the value of data, identify trends for process improvements, and measure real success in

your payroll operations. Register today for this interactive program offered virtually or in person at americanpayroll.org.

I just want to say thank you so much for joining us today. This has been a wonderful conversation, and as we approach the new year, I know we are all examining what the future holds for us. And I'm so happy to have you join us to share your insights, to help prepare our listeners for a rewarding leadership career. I think it's something that many of us are seeking and searching for, and I think that the advice that you've given us here today is really applicable. And so thank you for your time.

Cyndi Karapogos...: My pleasure, Nina. Thank you for inviting me to this call. And for the listeners, I said it earlier, payroll and somebody's paycheck is one of the most important and impactful things in their lives, so thank you for everything that you do because you make a difference.

Nina Talley: Yes.

Cyndi Karapogos...: So I really appreciate you inviting me to the call.

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

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