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## *Completing the Equation*

**Rita Ademu-John, Payroll Director at Pfizer,  
Does Her Part for a Healthy Future**

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**BY KIKO MARTINEZ**



Background image is part of a Pfizer "freezer farm," a football field-size facility for storing finished COVID-19 vaccines (image courtesy of Pfizer).

*Photos by Simone Schmetz;  
Cover composite by Tracy Stoffel*

It's been more than a year since the COVID-19 pandemic started in the United States, and it finally feels like there's a light at the end of the tunnel as several pharmaceutical companies have worked hard to deliver a safe, effective vaccine. One of those companies is Pfizer.

Helping to pay approximately 25,000 Pfizer employees in the United States and Puerto Rico—from scientists to manufacturers to forklift operators and beyond—is Payroll Director Rita Ademu-John.

Dedicated scientists at Pfizer developed a vaccine that would save lives and allow America and the world to have hope of returning to normal. As they did, they needed similarly dedicated employees such as the payroll team to support their work and allow them to focus on their crucial tasks.

### Leading a Strong Team

In the payroll department at Pfizer, Ademu-John manages 10 in-house colleagues and one contractor. In all, she supervises a Senior Manager, Manager, Financial Analyst, Tax Analyst, Payroll Administrator, two Payroll Analysts, and three Pay Masters who oversee time and attendance for all weekly paid colleagues in the United States and Puerto Rico.

"It's absolutely wonderful to know that payroll is doing its part and keeping our colleagues happy so they can do the work they need to do," Ademu-John said. "I'm extremely proud of our team. We complete the equation."

While there are plenty of payroll challenges working for a pharmaceutical company, Ademu-John said most of them are not exclusive to her industry. Where things get tricky is when payroll best practices within a specific company come into play.

"Allocation of taxes, savings plans, benefits, and things like that are where the complexities come," she said. "Like other industries, we have people who live in one state and work in another state. We have to make sure the vendors that we work with are set up correctly."

One of the biggest challenges during her time at Pfizer came in 2014 when the company started making plans to move from what Ademu-John calls a "quasi in-house" payroll system to a more managed service process with another vendor.

"The software we were using at the time was highly customized," Ademu-John said. "We would make it do whatever we requested. We could make it as efficient and effective as we needed it to be. But we needed a change because the company embarked on a roadmap technology solution, which included payroll."

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*Kiko Martinez is Associate Editor of Membership Publications for the APA.*

Giving themselves a little over a year to go live with a different system, Ademu-John and her team worked hard to transfer everything they needed from one major system to another and to do it as seamlessly as possible.


"Our policies and processes and benefits that we needed to implement is what made the transition complex," she said. "We needed to make sure all of it worked the way it was intended. We had our challenges, but we worked through them and came up with solutions."

### Early Beginnings

Ademu-John's story started 44 years before the global health crisis reached the United States in 2020. In 1976, she moved with her family from their home in Freetown, Sierra Leone, a country on the West Coast of Africa, to live in Manhattan.

"I came to the United States to get an education," she said. "I was young and excited and wanted to experience a new environment. I remember the first thing I wanted to do was get into a good school."





“Payroll is huge and complex, and I found out very early that there is a lot to learn.”

With an interest in furthering her secretarial skills, Ademu-John started attending the Wood Tobé-Coburn School, where she earned an associate degree in executive administration. She started her career at American Standard Inc. in New York as a secretary in the Risk Management Department, where she worked for two years.

“I wanted to be in the business arena, so my strategy was to start with the skills I already had in the secretarial field,” she said. “But then I wanted to further that, so I did, and I ended up excelling.”

### From Secretary to Payroll Director

Ademu-John acknowledges that she did not intend to work in payroll for more than 40 years. She started working at Pfizer in October 1980 as the Secretary to the Payroll Manager. After about a year, she realized that to climb the corporate ladder, she needed to go back to school to earn her bachelor’s degree. So, she decided to major in international marketing at Pace University.

“I quickly moved from being a secretary to processing payroll,” she said. “Before I knew it, I was learning other functions within the payroll department and went from one position to the next and got more responsibilities.”

After a few years at Pfizer, where she was learning every aspect of the payroll department, Ademu-John decided to go back to school again, this time to earn her master’s degree in business administration from Long Island University in Brooklyn. It helped that Pfizer offers its employees 100% tuition assistance reimbursement.

“I knew my bachelor’s degree wasn’t going to sustain me,” she said. “I was going to need to further my education to get to where I wanted to be at Pfizer. With my master’s, I became Manager, then Senior Manager, and now Director of Payroll.”

Sean Hellman, Senior Payroll Associate for Pfizer, has known Ademu-John for six years. He said what makes her an effective Payroll Director is her ability to react to all situations. He credits her for being a great teacher and mentor.

“Any time an issue arises, she can fall back on her real-world experiences to ensure a sound resolution is accomplished,” Hellman said. “She has never been shy about sharing skills or lessons that could benefit me. She wants the best for her team and never stops trying to help us achieve the goals we set out to accomplish.”

### A Dynamic Career

For Ademu-John, payroll has given her the opportunity to meet, work, and communicate with people at all levels inside and outside of the organization.

“As I managed and participated in projects and regular payroll work, I was exposed to the work of my colleagues in other departments, their roles and responsibilities, and the relationships between them and payroll,” she said. “My skills and knowledge base continued to expand as I quickly realized that payroll is an important, critical function in an organization. That kept me motivated and enthusiastic for a career in payroll.”

She said that while working in payroll can be stressful “because there is little room for error,” she enjoys the fact that the environment she operates in is “dynamic” and that no two days are alike.

“I also love the fulfillment I experience when an issue, project, audit, or any challenge is successfully resolved,” she said. “We can manage and implement new regulations, laws, rules, and policies quickly and as frequently as they change while continuing to maintain our high standards of accuracy and efficiency.”

With a new U.S. President only four months into his administration, Ademu-John anticipates new policies will come, but said she and her team will be ready to meet the needs of their employees.

“We need to be ready to address whatever changes are passed,” she said. “But we always try to meet whatever goals and timelines we’re given. We step up to get it done. Decisions are made at a higher level, and we have to be ready to make sure we meet those goals.”

Kathleen Seraut, Senior Manager of Payroll Operations at Pfizer, met Ademu-John 20 years ago when she was assigned as a Business Analyst supporting payroll for the United States and Puerto Rico. She said Ademu-John’s payroll expertise is “unsurpassed” and that she truly cares about her entire team—professionally and personally.

“It is very hard to conjure up a time when Rita was not able to provide explanation or direction,” Seraut said. “Rita reminds her team that all the work we do has an impact on the company as a whole: our long hours, the attention to detail, our innovative ideas, dedication to accuracy, and timely pay. All of this goes into Pfizer’s success as a company.”

### APA Helped Expand Knowledge

Ademu-John said she got involved with the APA more than 20 years ago. She started by attending the annual conferences and local events because she wanted to learn more about the different areas in payroll and to expand her skills.

“I also took some courses to help me gain more knowledge about the entire payroll process,” she said. “Payroll is huge and complex, and I found out very early that there is a lot to learn. The American Payroll Association helped me acquire the knowledge I needed in the beginning as well as still today to stay informed about payroll compliance developments.”

Her advice to payroll rookies is to not let first impressions become overwhelming. She said it’s important to always stay focused, pay attention to details, and remain diligent.

“Always keep your eyes on achieving a successful result in everything you do,” she said. “Do not let the noise or negative comments bother you. Always be willing to learn, grow, and take on new responsibilities, and don’t be afraid to ask questions. ■



# What’s Cookin’?

BY KIKO MARTINEZ

**W**hen she’s not paying Pfizer employees, Rita Ademu-John said she loves to cook in her spare time. In fact, while she was working as a payroll professional a few years ago, she and her husband, Shika, opened an authentic African restaurant in Somerset, New Jersey, called Awujoh. It was named after a feast in Sierra Leone held to celebrate and remember our loved ones who have departed. While the restaurant has since closed, Ademu-John still considers cooking her passion.

“Until this day, we still get calls from people asking about that restaurant and if we’re going to open it up again,” she said.

“They think I should still be cooking and serving instead of relaxing when I’m home. There are so many things to cook, and I enjoy doing so for my family these days!”

In 2012, she and Shika published a cookbook titled “My Wife’s Hands—An African Cookbook: West African Recipes.” The book contains more than two dozen recipes for everything from okra soup to banana fritters to one of Ademu-John’s favorites, jollof rice.

“Jollof rice is usually eaten with a stew—whether it’s chicken or beef,” she said. “There are so many authentic foods I love to make. People love my food so much.” ■

