

# Is payroll the new land of opportunity?



**Nick Day ACIPP, managing director at JGA recruitment group** talks about patterns he is seeing in the payroll job market and how they've recently changed

I've worked in payroll recruitment for over 20 years, and I've lost count of the number of times a payroll professional has told me they have 'fallen into payroll'. Perhaps this was the case historically; however, we're now seeing people pro-actively opt to pursue a career in payroll, and this is significant, because it highlights how far the industry has come.

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Covid-19 lockdown measures have also accelerated a change in perspective towards payroll. Payroll professionals were praised for their tireless work, despite constant changes to furlough legislation that pushed payroll departments to breaking point. Over 11.7 million employee jobs were put through the scheme at a cost of £70 billion.

We've even witnessed world leaders, such as the Australian prime minister, Scott Morrison, publicly thank the efforts of payroll practitioners "for playing your part in what has been an extraordinary effort". Subsequently, the importance of payroll is getting recognised as an essential strategic and operational function, and with this recognition, we've seen an explosion of new payroll career pathways open within the industry.

The World Economic Forum released an article in 2020 reporting that advances in automation and artificial intelligence (AI) would displace 85 million jobs and create 97 million new ones by 2025. The pandemic has also resulted in the largest home-working experiment of all time,

proving payroll professionals can deliver results from remote locations. Automation, evolving software and advances in analytics, reward packages and well-being initiatives have resulted in many new payroll career options coming to the fore.

### **A plethora of payroll opportunities**

Let's explore how these market forces have impacted payroll career opportunities. Along with the CIPP, JGA Recruitment Group undertook a research project to identify how many different payroll career pathways existed, and the results were surprising. We successfully identified over 60 career pathways for payroll professionals. Interestingly, it seems the most significant post-pandemic changes haven't been confined to where, when, and how payroll professionals work; but also, by what they do.

As businesses aim to become more employee-centric and more profitable against a backdrop of rapid change and transformation, payroll skills have been forced to adapt and evolve in response. For example, payroll job descriptions have become more strategic and analytical, and less process-driven than they used to be. In addition, as organisations strive to achieve improvements in payroll efficiency, global compliance, systems, employee wellness, and data analytics, companies are demanding more from their payroll operations.

Payroll departments handle the most significant operating expenses (OPEX) of most businesses – employee wages. In addition, payroll departments manage and collect more data than almost any other business function. With data now considered one of the most valuable resources globally, it's no surprise the profile of payroll has increased, as

organisations begin to appreciate the influence payroll strategy and efficiency can have on organisational performance. It's why we're seeing more brands than ever before asking us to support them to recruit payroll director-level hires.

Meanwhile, it's estimated that the European payroll and human capital management markets are valued at over £25 billion. Where there is profit, there is opportunity. Small and medium-sized enterprise technology start-ups and enterprise-level providers seeking to improve cloud-based solutions, payroll data security, global payroll complexity or systems efficiency for businesses need to recruit to keep up with demand. We have, therefore, seen a plethora of new payroll sales roles, from business development managers and payroll customer success professionals to payroll sales directors, enter the industry.

As the new age of automation and AI continues to develop, payroll responsibilities are changing in response. Payroll career opportunities in implementation consultancy, change management and project management are increasing. Meanwhile, post-transformation, organisations understand knowing how technology works (and how to leverage it for maximum value) is equally critical, which is why the demand for payroll system managers, global payroll specialists and payroll data analysts has also increased.

### **Increased demand for payrollers**

The much-publicised 'Great Resignation' is a very real phenomenon that has impacted the payroll profession. In fact, we've secured a record number of payroll vacancies that have materialised because employees are choosing to leave one

employer for another. The critical reasons behind these resignations tend to relate to workplace flexibility, inconsistent leadership, career progression limitations or remuneration. However, the great resignation is not confined to the payroll profession. Across all industries, talent is moving, and in response, companies are creating attractive packages to entice top talent to join them as they try to scale and grow. This battle for talent is impacting the payroll industry, as we've seen a stark rise in the demand for payroll professionals with expertise in reward or well-being initiatives. Companies are seeking payrollers who can link pay and performance with organisational goals to help them attract and retain talent. Consequently, we're seeing more hybrid payroll and reward-type roles emerging focused on developing pay and benefit offerings that meet the needs of their diverse workforces.

As payroll positions change, skills evolve, compliance changes and technologies advance, payroll training providers have become the pivotal hub payroll professionals rely on, as they seek to develop the skills required for this

new world of work. We've also seen an increase in the demand for payroll tutors, legislation managers and policy writing professionals emerge in response.

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**Shifting opinions of payroll**

Personally, I've always likened payroll professionals to chameleons. My view is that the payroll community has always adapted and evolved, no matter the pace or scope of change ahead. However, it appears payroll is finally starting to shake

off its out-of-date number-punching, big red button, wages clerk tag. It's shedding its transactional camouflage and putting itself at the epicentre of employee engagement, data management, technology, OPEX efficiency and compliance. This change in industry profile is bringing many new career pathways for payroll professionals to consider, and I have no doubt more opportunities will follow in the future.

With over 60 career pathways to choose from right now, payroll professionals are no longer restricted by glass ceilings or transactional tasks. Payroll is a pivotal function that has gained recognition as a business function that can influence and drive value to support much broader organisational objectives. As a result, people are no longer 'falling' into payroll; instead, perhaps for the first time, people are proudly and pro-actively choosing payroll as a career, because of the exciting and varied opportunities the industry provides. ■

Want to download JGA's payroll career pathway PDF? Visit: <http://ow.ly/Hm4K30sa1Hq>.

