

Unseen heroes: You only hear about payroll when things go wrong

There's a strange truth about working in payroll: If no one notices you, it means you've done your job.

 By [Anton van Heerden](#) 16 Oct 2025



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Payslips go out, taxes are filed, and teams are paid on time, and no one says a word. No news is good news, right? Until it isn't.

When something goes wrong - a missed run, a tax submission error, or a delay in payment - that same silence quickly turns into panic. Payroll becomes front-page news inside the business and suddenly, the person who keeps everyone paid is also the person under fire.

This is the invisible burden payroll professionals carry every month. Pressure without praise. Risk without recognition.

We're beginning to see a shift:

Quiet pressure, constant complexity

Payroll might look routine on the surface, but under the hood, it's one of the most complex processes in a business, especially in South Africa.

We're not just talking about calculating hours. We're talking about BCEA compliance, UIF, SDL, PAYE, Coida, Employment Equity, Sars submissions, and industry-specific agreements; sometimes across multiple regions or countries.

According to



Automation is not the enemy

The myth that automation will replace payroll professionals is exactly that: a myth.

What we're seeing instead is that when automation removes repetitive and high-risk tasks such as bulk imports, data matching, and manual tax table checks, payroll professionals get room to breathe, to focus on people, to lead change, and to grow their skills.

A [2023 study by Forrester Consulting](#), commissioned by Deel, found that businesses using modern global payroll systems saw up to 60% time savings in payroll processing and a 90% reduction in payroll error rate. These improvements had a measurable impact on both employee satisfaction and payroll team capacity.

Retirements, resignations, and risk

Here's another reality we need to talk about: the experience drain.

The payroll professionals who've been keeping companies afloat for the past 20 or 30 years? They're retiring or many of them have already left.

According to [Pew Research](#), nearly 29 million Baby Boomers retired in the US by the third quarter of 2020 alone, a steep increase accelerated by the pandemic. While this is US-centric, the trend is mirrored globally putting specialist roles like payroll under pressure as experienced professionals exit faster than they're replaced.

When your payroll expert leaves - and they will - it's more than a handover; it is also a risk event. Suddenly, the knowledge of which file to upload first, which exemption applies, which third-party report gets submitted when... disappears.

Outsourcing gives you continuity and ensures that your process doesn't break when people leave. You get a full team, not just a name on a desk.



Creating room for growth

One of the most overlooked benefits of outsourcing payroll is capability, not just cost.

By shifting the heavy admin load, internal HR and finance teams can focus on what matters: growth, employee experience, training, and compliance strategy. More importantly, payroll specialists can move from survival mode to advisory mode.

Instead of running corrections late at night or troubleshooting last-minute leave balances, they can lead policy reviews, upskill in analytics, and partner with leadership to design better systems.

Work-life balance should be built in - it shouldn't be seen as a 'luxury'. When the pressure is spread across a team of experts with robust systems and processes, that balance becomes possible.

The "payroll tannie" should also be able to go on a well-deserved break in December and not be on stand-by the whole time.

Recognition starts with respect

Let's say this clearly: payroll professionals are specialists. They are risk managers, legal interpreters, tech operators, and trusted stewards of something every employee relies on, but they are rarely recognised unless something goes wrong.

That needs to change.

It starts with creating systems that don't rely on heroic efforts to function. Systems that reduce pressure, improve accuracy, and give these professionals the space and support they deserve.

Whether that's through internal investment, automation, or outsourcing, it's time.

Payroll is more than a process; it's the people. When it works well, it allows businesses to grow and professionals to thrive, quietly, confidently, and without burnout.

Final thought

No one claps when payroll is perfect. And that's okay. However, if you're leading a business, managing an HR team, or working in payroll yourself, ask this:

Who carries the invisible pressure in your business? What happens if they burn out, resign, or retire?

My take? Ensure you're not one person away from a crisis, but a full team.

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