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**Carolyn Hayden-Garner, CPP, CPM, Tesla's Payroll Director,
Embraces Her Role as Inspirational Mentor, Leader**



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Carolyn Hayden-Garner, CPP, CPM, Tesla's Payroll Director,
Embraces Her Role as Inspirational Mentor, Leader

BY KIKO MARTINEZ



While working in her first payroll leadership role with the Dallas Independent School District, Carolyn Hayden-Garner, CPP, CPM, was contacted by a school administrator. There was a clerk working at the campus they felt was overqualified for her job who they thought would be a great fit in the payroll department.

Hayden-Garner, who is currently the Director of Payroll at Tesla, a position she's held since 2018, agreed to interview the employee. During the interview, she asked the employee a straight-forward question and was impressed by her answer.

"I asked her, 'What do you want?'" Hayden-Garner said. "She confidently responded, 'I want your job.' I jumped up and said, 'Yes!'"

Hayden-Garner loved the employee's enthusiasm and hired her for an entry-level position in the payroll department, and it was one of the best decisions she's ever made as a payroll leader.

"She became my right and left hand," Hayden-Garner

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

said. "She handled all the tasks that others walked away from, worked long hours, and soaked up all of the knowledge that I shared."

The employee was Shamiki Mitchell-Reliford, CPP, CPM, who is currently the Manager of Payroll, Timekeeping, and Special Services at Northrop Grumman Corporation, an aerospace and defense company. Mitchell-Reliford remembers Hayden-Garner as an inspirational figure who guided her into a career she always wanted.

"[Carolyn] put my feet to the fire but also let me know that I was capable of the things she was throwing my way," she said. "She was the kind of mentor who would challenge you but wouldn't leave you. She would work with you. If you were on the floor, she would get on the floor with you and bring you up."

Hayden-Garner's experience as a mentor has been a driving force throughout her career. Whether processing payroll in education, commercial real estate, aerospace, or manufacturing, she loves to support her fellow payroll professionals as they maneuver through the industry.

"I realized early on that the No. 1 asset I have been given to manage is not the job, but the people," she said. "By doing that, [employees] bring their whole selves



to work. They're creative, respected, accountable, and perform the hell out of any assigned task."

Set Up for Success

Originally from West Helena, Arkansas, Hayden-Garner began her payroll journey as a payroll accountant at Dallas ISD in 1993. There was plenty to do in the position, and during the first few months, Hayden-Garner "worked diligently" to organize the day-to-day processes and put the payroll department on the right path forward.

"I came in eager to learn," she said. "There were more reconciliations that were out of balance than there were hours in the day. Bank accounts had not been reconciled, so I got all of those cleaned up. Then, I peeked at accounts payable and got all of those cleaned up, too."

When it came time to start having conversations about the entire payroll system and what the school district needed to do to modernize it, Hayden-Garner said she was

the first to raise her hand and ask if she could be involved in some of the decision making.

"I started to work closely with the director and started building relationships with human resources, treasury, accounting, and executive leaders," she said.

When her director retired, Hayden-Garner was prepared to transition from her role as a payroll accountant to the district's Director of Payroll.

"Because of the relationships I had created and my brand, those who I worked with were excited that I had been promoted," she said. "They were equally responsible for my success."

Becoming the school district's Director of Payroll, however, was just the beginning for Hayden-Garner. She made sure that she finished her master's degree prior to becoming the Director, a goal she had "placed on the back burner." Hayden-Garner describes herself as someone who is always "learning and observing" and continually looking for the next educational opportunity.

"I wanted to change the requirements of payroll by raising the bar and having the knowledge to start tackling some of the complex transactions that I saw on the horizon," she said. "I knew it would require a higher level of analytics and critical thinking."

Part of her educational journey included familiarizing herself with the APA and the Global Payroll Management Institute (GPMI), which, she said, have helped her connect to the best payroll resources in the world. For example, an APA course like **Foundations of Payroll Analytics** can help payroll professionals demonstrate dynamic leadership, leverage the value of data, identify trends for process improvements, and measure real success in their payroll operations.

Through the APA and GPMI, Hayden-Garner has had the opportunity to attend major events like Payroll Congress and to continue mentoring those around her. You can catch Hayden-Garner speaking at next month's **41st Annual Payroll Congress**, May 16-19, in Denver, as an industry expert speaker.

“Working in the global space can be a challenge,” she said. “GPMI has provided insight, best practices, and top-notch country-specific knowledge. Both organizations are a lifeline for any payroll professional.”

A Servant’s Heart

It was evident to Janice Davis how much ambition Hayden-Garner had early on when the two worked together at Dallas ISD. Davis hired Hayden-Garner as the district’s Director of Payroll. She considers her a “protégé” and has been impressed—but far from surprised—at what Hayden-Garner has accomplished during her career.

“When I met Carolyn, she was so dedicated to her craft,” Davis said. “Even before she was the Director of Payroll, her leadership skills showed. She took initiative whenever something needed to be done. She came up with creative ways to deal with situations. Whenever there was a problem, Carolyn would be there, shoulder to shoulder with me and her employees. She made the perfect servant-leader.”

Hayden-Garner remained a valuable member of Dallas ISD for 15 years, where she rose to the position of Executive Director of Payroll. She continued her payroll career at several companies over the next 10 years, including CBRE, a commercial real estate services company, and Northrop Grumman. In her professional career, Hayden-Garner has earned Oracle’s Innovator of the Year Award, CBRE’s African American Networking Group Management Excellence Award, and Northrop’s Quality Award.

In 2018, Hayden-Garner got a call from Tesla executives asking if she would be interested in joining their team. In her current position as Tesla’s Director of Payroll, she is responsible for all facets of payroll that span the Americas, 29 countries in Europe, and India. This includes payroll processing, reporting, compliance, recruiting, and managing third-party payroll vendor relationships and internal key partnerships.



“In order to be successful in payroll, you have to have a servant’s heart,” Hayden-Garner said. “You have to respect and support your leaders, be accurate, accountable, and actionable, and you have to care about people.”

She also serves as the Executive Sponsor of Black at Tesla, the company’s employee resource group, which advocates for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

“[DEI] exposes team members to various ideas and new ways of solving problems,” she said. “Having a diverse team opens the doors for creativity, increases the company’s profitability, and helps attract and retain talent.”



Clockwise from top: Hayden-Garner with her Europe, the Middle East, and Africa (EMEA) Tesla team; Hayden-Garner speaking during a mentoring session; and Hayden-Garner posing with the board of her nonprofit organization, Mothers Shut In.

Giving Back; Looking Forward

Caring about people also means caring about yourself, Hayden-Garner said. Payroll is a fulfilling job, but it's also demanding and complex. Hayden-Garner would be the first to admit that sometimes it can be stressful, especially when you're expected to be the leader of a growing company and carry the responsibilities of being a full-time wife, mother, and grandmother.

To take command of her day, Hayden-Garner has implemented what she calls "sister time," which begins at 5:45 a.m. every morning via conference call and includes "meditation, encouragement, and transparency" with a few friends and acquaintances. She started "sister time" seven years ago and hasn't looked back.

"This is how I start my day—with positive affirmations," she said. "It helps me to be grounded and be present for my current assignments, and it helps with mental health."

Hayden-Garner also stays grounded by getting involved in her community. One of her mantras is that "it's better to give than to receive" and believes she has "a responsibility to give back" by volunteering with nonprofit organizations

like Women Helping Women and Seeds of Hope. She is also the founder of Mothers Shut In, a nonprofit that empowers women from diverse backgrounds.

Last year, Hayden-Garner was recognized as a top 4 finalist in Nexstar Media's campaign for Remarkable Women in the Utah Region; named to Utah's 40 Over 40 list; and won Impact Magazine's Women of Impact Award. This year, she was honored by the All-Star Gospel Celebration with the Slam Dunk "Game Changer Award."

As she looks forward in her career, Hayden-Garner thinks about her legacy as a payroll professional. She hopes it includes her work as a mentor who can get the best out of people to help them find their own paths to success. When she finally retires, she would like to open her own boutique consulting firm and teach classes for the APA and GPPI. She also aspires to sit on a board of directors that will utilize her knowledge in payroll, human resources, and accounting.

"In payroll, you never have to be concerned about employment opportunities if you are willing to consistently learn and be creative, coachable, and strategic," she said. "It's the most rewarding career in the world." ■