Technology can speed payroll when employees are scattered

The problem with processing payroll when employees are working from home is employees: Their home computers aren't as secure as their work computers and their typical, normal questions take up way too much of your time. Technology can be your friend, here.

Martin Armstrong, CPP, MBA, DBA, vice president of payroll shared services at Charter Communications, gave attendees at the American Payroll Association's virtual Congress a tutorial on how advanced technologies can make your life better. Or at least easier.

Blockchain for payroll

Blockchain came to the fore because it's usually paired with BitCoin or other virtual currencies. True to its name, blockchain is a block of data or information that's chained together, Armstrong said. Payroll data includes employees' names, Social Security numbers, addresses and bank account numbers.

Blockchain is accessed with a public key and a private key, which must be used together, Armstrong added. He explained that once the system is verified using these keys, the transaction is combined with other transactions to create a new block of data to the ledger. *Even better:* A block or a chain usually can't be broken because of the peer-to-peer network, algorithms and the keys.

Blockchain is more secure than employee self-service portals, which would protect employees' direct deposit data from identity thieves who try to gain access to employees' bank accounts by spoofing HR memos. It could also be used to dispute an employee's overtime claim, if you don't have paper records, he said.

RPA and AI

Robotic process automation and artificial intelligence are already here, Armstrong stressed. If you've ever had an online form auto-populate, you've experienced RPA. RPA runs on rules you write for it; artificial intelligence learns human responses (think online chatbots).

RPA runs on artificial intelligence and can be used for recurring, objective, high-volume transactions. According to Armstrong, RPA is handling the following repetitive payroll tasks:

- Inputting employees' time and attendance, including corrections
- Paying deceased employees
- Verifying employment
- Reprinting W-2 and creating Forms W-2c.
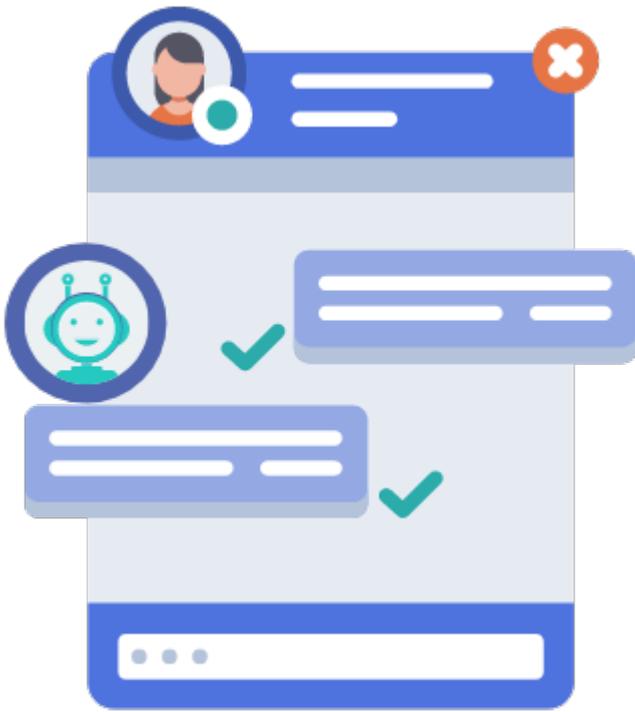
I'D LOVE TO CHAT, BUT

Ever wish you had a dedicated employee to handle employees' payroll questions? Well, you can have one—a chatbot—that doesn't draw a paycheck, Armstrong said. Chatbots can handle employees' routine questions, such as where's my pay statement, how much accrued vacation time do I have and where can I find W-4s?

You're not permanently writing off interactions with employees; now you can have more meaningful conversations with them.