

An excerpt from "Being Present" by the Workforce Institute

# Using technology to improve your frontline employee experience



# Chapter 7: Using Technology To Improve Your Frontline Employee Experience

Written by Dennis Miller

In my work as Chief Employment Officer at Cal Poly Pomona Foundation, Inc., I've had the opportunity to see up-close-and-personal the many challenges of overseeing and managing a large and diverse frontline workforce. One of the primary tools to do this more effectively is through the use of technology.

## Overview

I've spent more than ten years as Chief Employment Officer at Cal Poly Pomona Foundation, Inc., a nonprofit organization and an auxiliary corporation to the Pomona campus of the California State University (CSU) system. The Pomona campus is one of 23 campuses that make up the CSU system and is located about 35 miles east of Los Angeles on land spanning about 1,700 acres. The Pomona campus educates approximately 26,000 students annually and the total CSU system educates nearly 500,000 students annually throughout the State of California.

The Foundation provides a wide range of services in support of the campus and its students, such as providing all of the dining options on campus (30 different venues), the bookstore, student housing, a hotel and conference center, faculty/ staff housing, grant and contract administration for faculty research and development activities, and public-private-partnership operations. The Foundation employs about 2,400 employees throughout the year (including roughly 1,600 student employees) in its endeavor to deliver high quality, timely, affordable, and effective services to the campus community.

## Opportunities For Improvement In HR And Payroll Processes

Although our Foundation pays about 1,100 employees each pay cycle, we process about 2,400 W-2's at yearend. As stated above, most of our employees are student workers and all work on a limited/part-time basis of no more than 20 hours per week. In fact,



## BIO

Dennis Miller, currently AVP of Human Resources and Benefits Administration at The Claremont Colleges Services, was Chief Employment Officer at Cal Poly Pomona Foundation, Inc through November 2019. At Cal Poly Pomona Foundation he was responsible for overseeing the foundation's growing human resources function and continues to evolve the foundation's human capital management strategy in talent development and acquisition, benefits, compensation, and employee engagement programs. A highly respected executive with a penchant for solving business problems through human resources initiatives, Mr. Miller has served as the Chair of the Human Resources Committee for the Auxiliary Organization Association, and has served on several of its auxiliary committees including the Executive Committee. Prior to joining Cal Poly Pomona Foundation, he was Director of Human Resources at CSU Fresno Association, Inc. Earlier in his career, Mr. Miller led the evolution of the human resources function at Systems Management Specialists (SMS) during a period of high growth at the firm. Mr. Miller holds a MS from Chapman University and earned SPHR certification from HRCI.

since our student workers are mainly here to attend college, Foundation management takes steps to actively work around class schedules to help ensure student workers keep their goal of obtaining a college degree at the forefront of their priorities. What this means is there might be two, three or four student workers each working two to four hours, to cover an eight-hour shift.

Historically, the operating environment in the human resources and payroll departments at the Foundation included the use of four different technology-based systems that interfaced with each other at varying levels — sometimes automated and other times manual, along with a range of methodologies involving paper and technology-based processes that were labor intensive and non-scalable.

One system was used only for the HR database, another was used for timekeeping purposes, another for tracking fringe time, and another used for financial accounting and reporting that included a module for processing payroll.

While having four separate systems that had some level of interfacing did allow for process outcomes that were seemingly better than using just paper processes, the operating model had serious limitations and required several workers to have multiple steps of verification, re-verification, and yet re-verification again. Often, it was nearly an impossible task of determining which system had the most current data.

One historically problematic area was the I-9 process. Prior to the time of automation, which will be discussed later in this chapter, we used only paper I-9 forms in a centralized model — meaning, all new hires would need to show-up in the HR department, complete the I-9 form, have an HR employee verify the documents, and then HR would file the completed I-9 form.

Since the overwhelming majority of our new hires are — and remain — student workers, most of those workers are not familiar with what documentation they might need to get their I-9 approved. The process would start by the employee getting hired by the hiring manager and then the hiring manager would instruct the newly hired student worker to visit the HR department to get their new hire paperwork completed.

Often, new hires would arrive at the HR department with no appointment (there was no appointment mechanism in place) to complete the new hire paperwork, such as the I-9 form, and would invariably arrive without the needed documentation — in some cases, they left the documentation at their home, which was often out-of-state.

This scenario resulted in at least two trips to the HR department for the newly hired student worker: the first trip to get the process started and to hear from HR exactly what forms of ID would be acceptable to get their I-9 certified, and a return trip to the HR department along with the required ID to ultimately complete the I-9

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Chief Employment Officer

process. This process had to be very frustrating to these newly hired student workers and was certainly very time consuming and chaotic for our employees.

Once this I-9 process was completed, the HR department had to maintain tens of thousands of I-9 forms over a period of several years. In many cases, the HR team would take the initiative and photocopy the forms they collected, just in case they needed those forms to prove the company verified the appropriate ID forms. There were many forms reviewed and signed during the onboarding process, but none of those forms or processes were as problematic at the I-9 process and none were more important from a compliance standpoint — I-9 penalties are huge.

Another example of a serious inefficiency was our change of address process. Student workers represent about 85% of the frontline workers at the Foundation, and most of these student workers attend the University on a full-time basis to earn their college degree (their main goal in life), so working a job and dealing with employee-related tasks are not their highest priority.

As it turns out, students move their physical location frequently and with little advance notice.

The typical process to notify the appropriate parties in HR and payroll of an address change involved the following steps or tasks:

1. The individual would locate an “Address Change Form” and print it from the Foundation website.
2. The employee would complete the form and then forward it to either the Foundation HR or payroll department via the campus mail system.
3. Usually, within two to three days from the date this form was placed in the campus mail system, it would be delivered to the Foundation HR or payroll department.

Once the Foundation HR or payroll department received the Address Change Form, it would be placed into the workflow to be “processed.” The exact timing of when this form was processed was directly related to the level of priority it had compared to the stack of other forms that had already been submitted and received by the HR or payroll function. Address Change Forms had a much lower priority compared to other forms, such as new hire paperwork, etc.

It was common to observe several stacks of documents in the HR department at any given time — as well as the payroll department, and it was not uncommon for the process to take multiple weeks before a particular HR or payroll form would get processed and the data would be entered into the appropriate system.

In most cases, one of two scenarios would commonly occur. If the Address Change Form was addressed and sent to the HR department, the HR system would receive the updated address first. Once HR processed the Address Change Form, it would be forwarded to the



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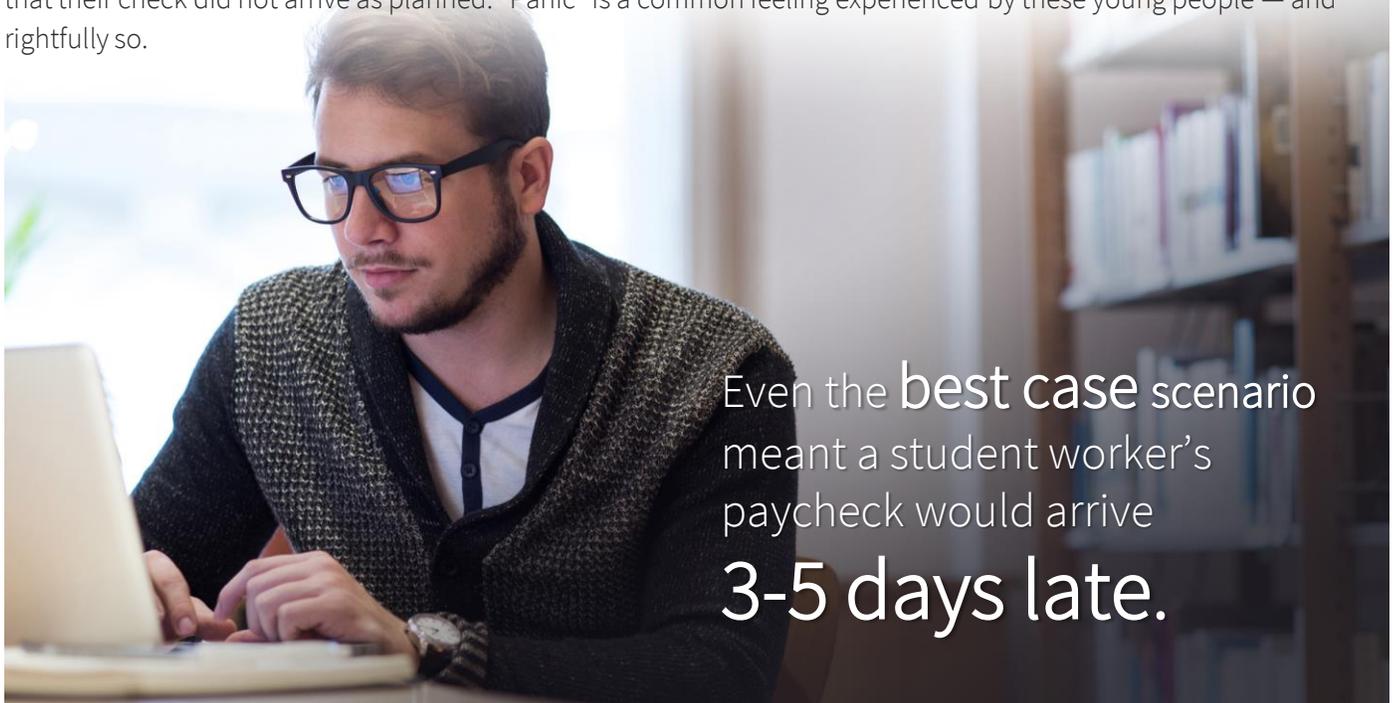
payroll department for manual entry into the payroll system, or when the Address Change Form was first sent to the payroll department it would get processed in that system first, and then get forwarded to the HR department for processing.

Although it may have taken the Address Change Form two to three days to arrive to the Foundation offices (where the HR and payroll functions are located), it would still take, on average, another 10 to 20 business days for that form to get processed by both HR and payroll departments, assuming the form did not get misrouted, mishandled, or filed accidentally.

In the meantime, while this Address Change Form was working its way through the process, a payroll cycle would have happened or was about to happen. As a result of the time it took to actually input this Address Change Form, the likelihood was all but guaranteed the payroll system would not get updated by the time payroll would have been processed, thereby ensuring the payroll check for this recently moved student worker would be sent to the wrong physical address.

This, in turn, resulted in a serious problem for the student worker since his or her paycheck would ultimately not be in the hands of the student worker in a timely manner. Even in an ideal scenario where the Postal Service was able to reroute the check and get it delivered according to Post Office standards, the paycheck would arrive three to five days late for this student worker.

Take a moment to think about a student worker, a young adult living away from home on an extended basis — often for the first time in his or her life — wanting to be independent and wanting to show their family they can stand on their own. They may be reluctant to reach out to their family for support. Now, after working for the last two weeks and coordinating their class schedule and work schedules, homework and study time, personal time, gym time, etc. all with the expectation that their small paycheck will be delivered on time and in the correct amount, they realize that their check did not arrive as planned. “Panic” is a common feeling experienced by these young people — and rightfully so.



Even the **best case** scenario meant a student worker's paycheck would arrive **3-5 days late.**

In fact, what we observed routinely, was that once the student worker confirmed their paycheck had not arrived on the exact date they expected, the student worker would make their way to the Foundation payroll department, usually immediately and often missing a scheduled class, to explain their situation to the payroll staff with the hopes of receiving another paycheck to replace the “lost paycheck.” In these cases, which happened every day throughout the day (literally), the student would often wait for their check to be processed before leaving the building.

Some may wonder why we do not use direct deposit for all employees to help reduce the impact associated with waiting for a paycheck to arrive. As a California employer with employees located only within the state, using direct deposit requires advance employee approval in all cases which means “requiring” direct deposit is not currently an option (which is not the case in many US states). Although we have a strong marketing and communication campaign including small incentives to help encourage employees to enroll in direct deposit, we still have nearly 30% of our workforce who rely on paper checks.

Fortunately for these students, our payroll department has a very caring and empathetic team with exceptional customer services skills, and the payroll team was happy to cancel a previously issued paycheck and replace it immediately to get the employee (student worker or otherwise) paid as soon as possible. Still, the constant interruption of scheduled work in the payroll function was frustrating to the payroll team members and often they were simply overwhelmed with the volume of walk-in customers.

Even in cases where a student worker was able to wait several days for their check to arrive at their new address, the student worker would still be distracted and concerned or worried about when their paycheck might arrive. This scenario, by itself, would have a negative impact on the ability of a student worker to remain focused on their coursework and learning objectives.

During high volume periods of hiring — which happened four times per year — the HR and payroll departments would hire temporary labor to help with the paper flow of work during those peak times. Once this peak hiring period ended, the temporary workers would be laid-off.

At this time in the history of the payroll function, the payroll team was deep in long-standing paperwork processes with many repetitive checks-and-balances required to help ensure all of the important tasks were completed in a timely and correct manner.

The process for handling the most basic of payroll or HR tasks — like the change of address I talked about — was completely broken. This broken process had a negative impact on the overwhelming majority of our frontline workers, and an equally negative impact on employees and our organization overall.

## A lack of accessibility to time collection devices

Payroll and HR processes were not the only areas in need of improvement. A lack of accessibility to data collection devices for timekeeping was also a huge issue.

Frontline workers were battling a lack of access to time clocks during nonstandard work hours, such as late at night or weekends when the office areas, where the time clocks were housed, were closed. Many roles in a campus environment — from resident advisors to health and wellness advisors — are needed after normal working hours, and on weekends, holidays, etc. to deliver services to students in a wide variety of areas. Since the office areas are closed during non-work hours, there was no time clock accessibility. Therefore, these particular workers would typically estimate the hours they worked during these times and then have someone enter those hours manually once the time clock became available again.

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Another data collection accessibility and process problem existed where student workers would have a paid internship type of arrangement — where they would work off-campus for a client willing to pay student workers to provide some level of work for their company, while offering these same student workers a valuable learning experience related to their degree program. In some cases, the student worker might also receive course credit — a truly wonderful learning opportunity for students attending college.

When it came to paid internships, student workers were using paper timesheets to record the time they worked for payroll purposes and the employer or client would then reimburse the Foundation for the hours the students worked on their projects. There were several key steps required in this process to bring it all together:

- The student intern needed to record the hours she worked on a paper document.
- The employer/client needed to approve the hours reported by the student and make adjustments where appropriate prior to submitting that data to the Foundation for payroll purposes, which typically was forwarded via email.
- Once the hours were received by the Foundation (usually the Foundation project manager for the internship program), they were manually entered into the Foundation timekeeping system for each student worker.

All of these tasks needed to happen on a strict timeline, or the student workers would not be paid in a timely manner, thereby triggering the same types of “lost check”/panic issues mentioned previously. In some cases, changes to student worker timecards would be made by the Foundation project manager after the time worked by the students was approved by the client. Those events resulted in billing issues since the amount of time paid to student workers would be different when compared to the records held by the client related to the hours the client had originally approved to pay.

Finally, on a campus spanning nearly 1,700 acres, one can imagine the logistical difficulty of having a time clock (or anything stationary used for data collection) located at the most ideal places for a worker, such as a maintenance worker, who works in different physical locations throughout a day within the campus environment. Imagine the amount of time completely wasted traveling to or from a time clock when it was time to clock-out/in for the required lunch break. HR professionals in the State of California are (or should be) laser-focused on the penalties and negative press associated with a lack of compliance in this area, so meal period compliance is a fairly important topic for California employers and their employees. Imagine how the worker must feel knowing they must leave their worksite five to ten minutes or more in advance of their meal break to make sure they do not inadvertently trigger a missed meal penalty (and likely a scolding from their boss).



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## Looking for answers

When examining all of the HR, payroll, and timekeeping processes together, it was evident that having four different technology-based systems interact with one another to handle human resources and payroll and timekeeping processes was an operational model that was no longer working for us.

In fact, the core process issues were related to a single technological defect — there were several systems interfacing with one another and each system had its own separate database.

As such, the solution toward this specific problem was not difficult or complex — it was obvious and really quite simple. What we needed was a cost-effective platform that used a single database for HR, payroll, and timekeeping.

In looking for a cost-effective platform where we would have a single database for HR, payroll, and timekeeping, we reviewed several different vendors, and reviewed our existing financial system vendor, our timekeeping provider, and our HR provider. Internally, we engaged our technology team. It seemed logical that if we could build upon our current systems, we might reduce the migration time and the learning time post migration, since there would already be some level of expertise with one or more components of the new platform.

What we needed was a **cost effective platform** that used a **single database** for HR, payroll, and timekeeping

As it turned out, there was no economical solution that would provide everything we wanted in our existing HR system or financial system. The financial system (which is the same system we used for payroll) already had payroll and we could have added HR, but they did not offer a timekeeping product. The HR system had only HR and no payroll or timekeeping, and that left the timekeeping system. As it turned out, the timekeeping system had an HR and payroll function, and they used a single database for all three functions.

## Finding solutions – and cost savings

Moving to a unified system was a game-changer for the Foundation. Issues that had been major problems in the past were nearly instantaneously resolved:

- All I-9's are now completed electronically through an online portal.
- Workers can use a self-service option to update their address whenever needed with the change reflected in real time in HR and payroll.
- Employees can request time off and managers can approve it using their mobile devices.
- Employees can clock-in and out wherever they are located via mobile device.
- Supervisors can easily verify exactly where and when an employee clocked-in or out using their mobile phone and google maps, if they feel the need for such verification.
- Supervisors can approve time worked for their employees using their mobile device.

Along with adopting this new technology, we also elected, after some time, to use cloud services to run and maintain it.

In-house hosting meant we had two dedicated servers for our platform, which included the production server, development server, and a part-time server for back-ups. The IT staff had to schedule and install quarterly tax updates, service packs, provide software configuration help to the HR and payroll team, address technological issues related to the hardware, maintain and tune the servers, and a long list of technology related tasks. We had a disaster recovery plan although it seemed marginal on any given day.



When we examined the options for cloud services, it became apparent that moving to the cloud would provide relief in all of these areas, which seemed too good to be true at that time. In fact, the outcome was better than we anticipated. Once we moved to the cloud the platform, the solution was maintained entirely by vendor experts.

Moving to cloud services has provided more value to our organization and to the HR and payroll function than anticipated — and, for us, this model is definitely cost effective especially when factoring in the IT team no longer needs to provide the ongoing support to the platform in-house. (This alone has given the IT team back about 500 hours annually to apply to other systems where they can continue to develop and use their talent.)

Speaking of cost, it is a fact that our operating expenses to operate the HR and payroll functions has decreased by more than 27% after making the improvements outlined above, which have occurred during the past several years. As of January 2019, our operating budget remains well below what it was five years ago.

Even more important though, is the shift in the mindset of our employees and managers on what might be possible with technology. As a rule, Foundation culture has embraced the use of technology throughout the organization — which is a good outcome — and we have leveraged technology to help all employees, all managers, and reduce the cost to the organization for operating the HR and payroll functions.

Now that we are no longer mired in the past, constantly dealing with broken processes and trying to keep pace operating four different technologies in HR and payroll, we are able to place focus on additional improvements with our delivery models and be laser-focused on strategic initiatives overall.

The future is, indeed, quite bright!

## Focus on the frontline

1. Workforce management technology can eliminate a lot of frustration and busy work for your employees, providing them with a better experience at work.
2. Frontline employees will value self-service options that, ideally, they can use from their mobile devices.
3. Involving frontline employees in requirements gathering and design of new systems will yield better adoption of and satisfaction with a new system.
4. Don't underestimate the need for frequent and clear communication, delivered through multiple channels.
5. Training is critical to ensuring that your employees will get the value they should from a new solution.

## References

Cal Poly Pomona Foundation, Inc., <https://foundation.cpp.edu/>

Cal Poly Pomona Foundation, Inc., Employment Services. <https://foundation.cpp.edu/es/>



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