In This Issue:
Q&A With Your Immediate Past President

B2B Payments Innovation

Special Section:
Seamless System Integration

Cathy Burge, CPP
HAS THE RIGHT STUFF
Space Center Houston
Payroll Pro Has
THE RIGHT STUFF

Photo by Killy Photography

BY KERRY COLE
Space exploration takes training, dedication, and attention to detail. It can be scary at times, and in an emergency you have to cobble together a plan you never trained to perform, all for the sake of the mission.

The same can be said for payroll. Both are realms Cathy Burge, CPP, occupies as Payroll Coordinator for Space Center Houston.

The nonprofit Space Center Houston is the Official Visitor Center of NASA Johnson Space Center, a leading science and space learning center.

“The one-of-a-kind Independence Plaza exhibit (see cover photo) complex is very special to me,” said Burge, who has worked at Space Center Houston for 14 years, over two stints. “It’s the first thing that catches your eye as you enter the property. The sheer size of it is breathtaking. The hands-on exhibit displays are fascinating. Just walking inside the giant complex and standing in the historic shuttle carrier aircraft brings the history of the shuttle era alive for me.”

Basic Training
Like many payroll professionals, Burge fell into her role rather than pursuing it as a career. Her journey started at Space Center Houston in 1998, where she began working in accounts payable while serving as a backup employee in the payroll department. When the payroll coordinator left, she moved into the job and has been in payroll full-time ever since.

“At the time, it was just a job opening,” she said of her start with Space Center Houston. “I did not know a lot about Space Center Houston then. When I came to interview for the job, I was just blown away by the whole center. It’s a very exciting concept to work at a place like this. It has grown and become tremendously different from when I was first hired on. Very exciting things are happening here.”

Although she felt good about her training as a surrogate payroll employee, “it was totally different when I was doing it on my own.” In hopes of learning more about the entire payroll industry, Burge sought to obtain her Certified Payroll Professional (CPP) designation, soaking up as much training and knowledge as she could along the way. She credits the APA’s Houston Chapter stellar study group for their guidance.

“That’s one of the best things I ever did,” she said. “That really grounded me in being the payroll professional I wanted to be. Being thrown into this, I had no idea. I spent a great deal of time looking things up. It’s very frightening if you don’t know what you’re doing. Payroll professionals rely heavily on software, but I think it’s important to understand why the software is doing what it does in accordance with state and federal law. It really opens your mind to the things you need to know. I was very relieved to see that we were doing everything right.”
On a Mission

Space Center Houston draws more than a million visitors annually, 82% of them from outside the Houston area. Burge said she enjoys looking over the plaza from her office on the second floor and seeing the historic exhibits. The world premiere arrival in October of Destination Moon: The Apollo 11 Mission exhibit featuring the Apollo 11 command module should only boost those numbers.

“I can see it every day if I want to,” Burge said. “It’s fascinating. It reminds you that Space Center Houston is here for a reason.”

With people from all over the world coming to visit the center every day, Burge is proud she works with a team that can answer all their questions and make each visit an experience to remember.

“To see what they’re doing for the guests makes it all worthwhile,” she said. “Some of the people who have been here for years, they are walking computers. They could tell you anything about American space exploration.”

Every Friday, Space Center Houston guests can have lunch with a retired astronaut, hear a presentation, and engage in a question-and-answer session.

“My office happens to be right by the area where they give presentations, so I get to listen for free,” Burge said. “I open up my door, and I listen to the astronauts talk. They’re all very dedicated people, so it’s nice to hear what they have to say.”

Teamwork

Apollo 11’s command module lands at Space Center Houston in October for a five-month stay, a reminder of the day astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin stepped onto the surface of the moon in July 1969. But those two, along with command module pilot Michael Collins, got the opportunity to travel into space by the power of thousands back on Earth working together to bring about a successful mission.

“All this is possible only through the blood, sweat, and tears of a number of people,” Collins said at the time. “All you see is the three of us, but beneath the surface are thousands and thousands of others, and to all of those, I would like to say, thank you very much.”

Although Burge is a one-person payroll department, she and her fellow Space Center Houston crew members rely on each other’s support and expertise.

“People here are very team-oriented,” she said. “We have almost 20 employees who have been here since ’92. We have an older population as well as a younger one. They come and stay, and they are committed to giving the guests a great experience.”

Her experience and years of payroll education make Burge a valued resource for her peers. She keeps a copy of The Payroll Source® handy at all times, and it’s not unusual to see her flipping through its pages to make sure she has the correct answers to employees’ questions.

“It makes them comfortable that they are getting the correct answers to their questions and that I can back it up,” she said. “If a decision could affect payroll, the head of my department is very good about involving me, and sometimes I come at it from a different angle than they are thinking about.”
When Failure Is Not an Option

Visitors to Space Center Houston can see the make-shift filter system NASA engineers developed in April 1970 to save the astronauts of the Apollo 13 mission after one of its oxygen tanks exploded.

When Hurricane Ike brought havoc to Houston in September 2008, Burge faced a challenge of her own—though not one of life or death—to pay the center's employees in the midst of a power outage and a citywide curfew.

“Cathy is a joy to work with and a tremendous asset to our team,” said Janet Brown, the Director of Finance at the center. “She is attentive to detail, which makes her perfect for her payroll position. I know I can always depend on her to meet the weekly deadlines for paychecks, even when we have to evacuate or work under extreme conditions during hurricanes and bad weather.”

In the aftermath of Hurricane Ike, Burge and a management information systems employee made their way to the center and worked through their own innovative plan. Although the computer room at the center was the only room that was not shut down (and luckily still had air conditioning), Burge was adamant about getting the payroll processed on time.

“We literally had a small keyboard to enter changes since most of the building was on emergency power,” she said. “That’s how I sent payroll that week. It was impossible to see the hours that everyone had. I looked at the hours that they had before they were told to go home, and I just gave them vacation or paid time off to make them current for the week. It was just madness.”

Getting to and from the center was no small matter either, especially since there was a curfew enforced in the Houston area and many residents, including Burge, were without power at their homes.

“I was very concerned about getting in and out of the center before dark,” she said. “There was debris in the streets after the hurricane hit. But people needed their paychecks. They didn’t know what was going on behind the scenes, but my boss let people know and that made me feel good.”

Flying Solo

One of the Space Center Houston exhibits is the real Mercury Atlas 9 Faith 7 capsule, which astronaut Gordon Cooper piloted alone in orbit beginning on May 15, 1963. It marked the last time an American flew a solo orbital mission.

Burge works closely with Space Center Houston’s human resources department, but she’s a payroll department of one. The seasonal nature of the center makes the work complicated.

“Last summer we had over 125 extra employees,” she said. “Some of them are rehired seasonally. We have college and high school students who really enjoy it once they start working with us. Some of them become full-time once they graduate.”

Employees’ pay rates depend on the work they are doing at the time.

“One person might work in three different positions in the course of a day, and each position is a different rate,” Burge said. “I think that’s the biggest challenge—the different rates and the aspect of having 100 people hit and then two months later they’re gone.”

The center averages about 400 employees, with a high near 500, not including contractors not paid by the center.

“We have a very complex system of tracking our employees’ work activities, and she has mastered it,” Brown said. “She has extensive knowledge of the system and of payroll rules and regulations. With her vast experience in the payroll field, she is able to work through any challenge.”