

Payroll Officer interview questions

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What to expect

Payroll officer interviews test whether you can be trusted with sensitive data and a deadline that can't slip. Expect questions that probe your grasp of award and compliance rules alongside your composure when a pay run goes wrong close to cut-off.

- **Process:** Walking through how you'd handle a full pay cycle or a specific payroll task, step by step.
- **Technical/compliance:** Checking your working knowledge of awards, Superannuation Guarantee, PAYG withholding and Single Touch Payroll obligations.
- **Behavioural:** Past examples of catching errors, managing deadline pressure or handling a difficult pay query.
- **Scenario/judgement:** A specific pay calculation problem, such as a termination mid-cycle, to see how you reason through it.
- **Client-facing:** How you communicate with an upset or confused employee about their pay.

Most payroll officer interviews start with a short screening call covering pay systems used and award exposure, followed by a longer interview with the payroll manager or finance lead that mixes technical and behavioural questions. Some employers add a short practical exercise, such as a reconciliation or Excel task, before making an offer, given the access to sensitive pay and bank data the role involves.

1. Walk me through how you'd process a pay run from start to finish.

Why they ask

This checks whether you actually understand the full cycle, not just the software screens, and whether you build in checks before money goes out.

How to structure your answer

Step-by-step process walkthrough: describe inputs, checks, calculation, approval and output in order.

Example answer

"I start by pulling timesheets and leave requests and checking them against rosters for anything unusual, like an unapproved leave request or a shift that doesn't match the award pattern. Then I load new starters, terminations and any allowance changes into the payroll system and run a draft pay. Before finalising, I review the draft against the previous cycle looking for large variances, check that super and PAYG have calculated correctly, and get sign-off from my manager. Once it's approved I submit the pay file, lodge the Single Touch Payroll report, and reconcile the payroll clearing account to the general ledger before closing off the cycle."

2. How do you stay across changes to awards, the Superannuation Guarantee rate or Single Touch Payroll requirements?

Why they ask

Payroll rules change regularly and getting them wrong creates back-pay and compliance problems, so employers want evidence of an ongoing habit, not one-off study.

How to structure your answer

Direct explanation of sources and a practical example of applying a change.

Example answer

"I follow Fair Work Ombudsman updates and my payroll software provider's release notes, since most system providers flag award and legislative changes before they take effect. When the Superannuation Guarantee rate has changed, I've updated the rate in the payroll system ahead of the"

effective date and tested it on a sample pay before the live run, rather than relying on the system to catch it automatically.”

3. Tell me about a time you found an error in a pay run before it went out.

Why they ask

This is the core of the job: catching mistakes before they become underpayments or overpayments that are hard to claw back.

How to structure your answer

STAR: situation, task, action, result.

Example answer

“During a system migration, a batch of employees had been mapped to the wrong award classification, which would have underpaid their penalty rates. I noticed the pay values looked low compared to the previous cycle for that group and traced it back to the classification mapping. I corrected the mapping, reran the draft pay for the affected employees, and reconciled the difference back to the general ledger before the final pay file was submitted, so the error never reached anyone’s bank account.”

4. An employee is terminated partway through a pay cycle with unused annual leave owing. How would you work out their final pay?

Why they ask

Termination pays combine several rules at once and are a common source of disputes, so this tests your calculation logic under a bit of pressure.

How to structure your answer

Problem-solving walkthrough: identify the components, the order you'd calculate them in, and what you'd check before paying out.

Example answer

“I'd first confirm the termination date and reason, since that affects whether notice pay or redundancy applies. Then I'd calculate ordinary hours worked up to the termination date, any outstanding allowances, and unused annual leave paid out at the correct rate under the relevant award or agreement. I'd check whether leave loading applies and whether any deductions, like an unreturned uniform, are allowed under the employment contract before processing them. Before finalising, I'd double check the termination reason code is correct in the system, since that changes how tax is withheld on the payment.”

5. An employee calls upset because their pay is short. How do you handle that conversation?

Why they ask

Payroll officers deal with people's income directly, so employers want to know you can stay calm and clear rather than defensive.

How to structure your answer

Communication approach: acknowledge, investigate, explain, resolve.

Example answer

“I'd acknowledge that being short on pay is stressful and let them know I'll look into it straight away rather than making them wait. I'd check their timesheet, leave balance and any deductions while we're on the call if possible, and explain clearly what I find, whether that's an error I need to fix or a deduction they weren't expecting, like a salary sacrifice change. If it is an error, I'd tell them when it'll be corrected and follow up once it's done rather than leaving them to chase me.”

6. Payroll has fixed deadlines every cycle. Tell me about a time competing priorities put a deadline at risk and how you managed it.

Why they ask

This checks how you prioritise when everything feels urgent, given a pay run can't simply be pushed back like other admin work.

How to structure your answer

STAR: situation, task, action, result.

Example answer

"I once had a public holiday fall right before pay day, which compressed the time I had to process a large batch of leave adjustments and a handful of terminations. I flagged the risk to my manager early, worked through the leave adjustments first since they affected the most employees, and left the terminations, which needed extra checking, for a dedicated block of time rather than trying to do everything at once. The pay run still went out on time, and I didn't have to rush the termination calculations, which are the easiest place to make a costly mistake."