



Payroll

Payroll Without the Panic

Why payroll transitions fail. And how thoughtful
planning makes yours the exception.

Table of Contents

1	Nobody Wants to Talk About Payroll	3
2	Why Firms Are Hesitant — And Why That's Reasonable	4
3	Payroll Is More Than Payroll for an A/E Firm	5
4	Why Payroll Implementations Actually Fail	6
5	Payroll Horror Stories (and What They Actually Teach Us)	8
6	The Cost of Waiting Too Long	9
7	How BQE Makes Implementation Predictable	10
8	The Real Decision Isn't "Should We Switch"	11

Nobody Wants to Talk About Payroll

For architecture and engineering (A/E) firms like yours, payroll isn't something owners or employees want to think about — it's something everyone hopes will just keep working. It's complex, it touches every employee across multiple project teams, maybe multiple states, and if something goes wrong, it goes wrong publicly and immediately.

Most firm founders started their firm to design buildings or engineer systems, not to run payroll. These sorts of administrative tasks are necessary, but not why anyone became an architect or an engineer. Payroll is vital to the business staying open, but it's rarely where a principal wants to spend their attention, and it's easy to treat it as something to get through rather than something to get right.

That's exactly why many firms have an administrator, comptroller, CFO, or HR lead whose job it is to get it right. For these essential employees, the priorities are different and more specific: a system that's trustworthy, that doesn't make errors, that doesn't eat hours they don't have, and that they can rely on without checking its work every cycle. Whether you're the principal who'd rather not think about payroll at all or the person on the team who thinks about little else, the underlying hesitation to switch to a new and improved payroll system is the same: touching a working system feels riskier than leaving it alone.

That hesitation is rational. If your firm is busy, which most are, or has been through a rough payroll transition before, it makes sense that "let's just leave it alone" feels like the safer choice.

Our goal with this guide isn't to convince you payroll is simple. And it's not to hide that transitions are complex. It's to show you that an integrated payroll system is beneficial to your business, and that a predictable, low-risk transition is achievable. The difference between a smooth go-live and a painful one almost always comes down to careful planning, not luck. That's the thinking behind how BQE built CORE Payroll, how we designed our implementation process, and it's the thinking behind this guide.

“The difference between a smooth go-live and a painful one almost always comes down to careful planning, not luck.”

Why Firms Are Hesitant, And Why That's Reasonable

If you're leading an A/E firm, you likely fall into one of these camps:

- **You've been burned before.** A past transition between payroll systems left you fixing errors for months, fielding employee complaints, or explaining a paycheck mistake to someone who really needed that paycheck to be right.
- **You've heard bad stories.** Even if it hasn't happened to you, everyone in this industry has a colleague, a project manager, or seen a LinkedIn post about a payroll migration that went sideways: missed tax deposits, a benefits deduction that didn't map correctly, a go-live that became a two-month fire drill.
- **Your labor complexity is genuinely high.** A/E firms often aren't running simple, single-state payroll. You're managing project-based staff across multiple states, multi-rate billing across architects, engineers, and support staff, prevailing wage and certified payroll obligations on public-sector work, and payroll data that's supposed to flow into job costing and project profitability — not sit disconnected from it. More moving parts means more that can go wrong if a transition isn't planned carefully.
- **It works, so why touch it?** Your current payroll system runs. Paychecks go out on time, nobody's complaining, and there's no fire to put out. It just isn't talking to the rest of your firm's financial system. It's a separate subscription and another tool to manage, and data flow relies on syncing between different software. It's a system that isn't broken and doesn't feel like a problem, even when it's quietly costing time every single pay cycle.
- **You don't have the bandwidth right now.** This is about capacity more than fear. Between active projects, pursuing work, staff management, and everything else competing for attention, a system change can feel like something to get to eventually, once things calm down. For most firms, "once things calm down" never arrives on its own. Taken together, this is the actual difference between running a firm on numbers that are a month old and running it on numbers that are current. That's what "payroll as a strategic lever" means in practice.

All five of these are legitimate concerns. They're reasons to be thoughtful about how, and when, you switch payroll systems. But they aren't reasons to avoid switching altogether. Especially when there are clear benefits to having a fully integrated payroll system. The key is recognizing the benefits and the return on investment you get from a new system, and then carefully planning for a successful transition.

Payroll Is More Than Payroll for an A/E Firm

For a project-based, labor-intensive business, payroll isn't just an administrative task. It's the data source behind nearly every financial decision the firm makes. Labor typically falls between 30–45% of a firm's total operating expenses, according to BQE's 2026 industry benchmarking data. When your single largest expense is being tracked in a system that doesn't talk to the rest of your firm, you're creating a blind spot in the middle of your business.

Here's what that blind spot looks like day to day. A project starts running over budget because a staff member's hours aren't landing against the right job in real time. Nobody notices until the project's already closed and it's too late to course-correct. A principal reviews firm-wide financials that are technically accurate but three weeks old, because payroll and project accounting reconcile on their own separate schedules. An employee asks a simple question about their pay based on hours logged, and answering it means checking two systems instead of one. None of these are catastrophic on their own. They're just friction that adds up quietly, month after month, until someone finally asks why the numbers never seem to be current.

Integrated payroll isn't just about avoiding a bad transition. It's about what you gain once the transition is behind you: insights across your full firm's finances, and problems that surface while there's still time to fix them, not after a project closes or monthly expenses get reconciled. One system instead of three, so nobody's reconciling by hand or wondering which app to open or which spreadsheet is the right one. And the same data is available to everyone who needs it — a project manager checking a job's health, a controller closing the books, a principal deciding whether to staff up — instead of information locked in one department's system and everyone else waiting on a report.

That's exactly why the stakes feel high when a transition goes wrong, and exactly why it's worth getting right. The fear of disruption during a payroll change is really a fear of losing that visibility, even temporarily. A well-planned transition protects it instead of risking it. And once the integrated system is up and running it's game changer for your business.

Why Payroll Implementations Actually Fail

Worrying about the implementation of a new system is logical. Payroll implementations rarely fail because of the software itself. Failed or painful transitions trace back to a small, predictable set of root causes. Nearly all of them are avoidable with the right process. Here are some of the reasons we have seen implementations of other systems fail:

1. The timeline was compressed from the start

Most payroll problems don't start on go-live day. They start weeks or months earlier, when a firm decides to switch too close to its intended start date. A realistic implementation — data cleanup, configuration, a full parallel run, and stabilization — takes meaningfully longer than most firms assume. When the timeline is compressed, something gets cut. It's usually testing.

2. Employee and company data wasn't clean going in

Payroll systems are only as good as the data behind them. Incorrect addresses, outdated tax elections, mismatched pay rates, or incomplete new-hire files don't cause problems in a spreadsheet, but they do cause problems in a live paycheck. Migrations that get rejected or delayed almost always trace back to missing or inconsistent data discovered too late to fix calmly. Adopting a new system is the right time to audit all of your payroll and employee data.

3. No single person owned the transition

Payroll implementations that succeed have one clear owner. Someone with dedicated time carved out, not someone squeezing it in between other responsibilities. A transition that changes point-of-contact partway through loses institutional knowledge exactly when it's needed most, and firms are left sitting and waiting while a new owner gets up to speed.

4. Parallel testing got skipped or rushed

Testing the process before going live is the single best insurance policy against a false start. It's also the first thing to get cut when timelines are tight. Skipping it doesn't eliminate the errors; it just delays discovering them until they're live and affecting real paychecks. Don't rush the process and you drastically reduce the risk of any errors

5. Feature or scope gaps surfaced late

Every A/E firm has payroll quirks: job-cost-coded reimbursements, multi-state tax registrations for traveling project teams, prevailing wage and certified payroll reporting, custom earning codes tied to billing rates. When these aren't surfaced and mapped during setup, they show up as gaps after go-live — usually as an urgent, reactive fix rather than a planned one.

6. Employees weren't told what to expect

Even a technically flawless transition can feel chaotic if employees don't know it's happening. A new pay stub format, a new self-service portal, a slightly different pay date — all minor on their own, all capable of generating a flood of confused questions if nobody explained them in advance. Communicating early and often with your team is vital to set expectations and keep people informed before changes cause confusion.

Look at all six again and a pattern emerges: not one of them is really about the software. They're about planning — a timeline, an owner, a checklist, a conversation — done too late or not at all. That's the good news hiding inside the bad news. If these failures were random, there'd be nothing to do but hope. Since they're predictable, they're preventable. And why finding the right partner, with a careful implementation team is key. The rest of this guide is about exactly that: what it looks like to plan for each one before it becomes a problem instead of after.

Payroll Horror Stories (and What They Teach Us)

The Handoff That Cost a Month

A mid-sized firm was several weeks into its payroll transition when its main point of contact changed roles. The new contact had to reconstruct the project's status from email threads and half-finished spreadsheets. Decisions that had already been made got revisited. The firm's leadership didn't even know the go-live date had shifted until they asked why nothing seemed to be happening.

Lesson: A transition needs a named owner on both sides who stays through go-live, and a documented plan that doesn't live only in one person's head.

The Data Nobody Double-Checked

A firm assumed its employee records were accurate because "nothing had changed in years." During setup, it turned out several employees had outdated addresses, one had an incorrect tax filing status, and a handful of pay rates hadn't been updated after a recent raise cycle. None of it was caught until the first live paycheck went out wrong.

Lesson: "Nothing has changed" is not the same as "everything is accurate." A data audit before implementation catches problems on paper instead of on a paycheck.

The Test That Never Happened

Under pressure to hit a promised go-live date, a firm's internal team agreed to skip a full payroll test "just this once," planning to reconcile any issues after the fact. Several discrepancies in tax withholding calculations weren't caught until the following quarter's filings, requiring corrections and amended forms.

Lesson: Full testing isn't a nice-to-have step to cut when time is short. It's the step that protects you from spending far more time cleaning up an error after the fact.

The Wage Classification That Became a Federal Case

An engineering firm working on a federally funded project found out the hard way that "we've always classified roles this way" isn't the same as "we've always classified roles correctly." In one Army Corps of Engineers project, a contractor misclassified apprentices doing specialized work as ordinary laborers — a mistake that seems small on a timesheet but wasn't: it triggered a Department of Labor investigation and left the firm owing nearly \$45,000 in back wages to a dozen workers. Prevailing wage and certified payroll rules don't forgive good intentions; they require the classification to be right the first time, every time, on every applicable project.

Lesson: For firms with public-sector work, certified payroll and prevailing wage compliance can't be a manual, remember-it-every-time process. It needs to be built into how the payroll system applies rates and classifications automatically — not something a payroll admin re-derives from memory on each project.

The Cost of Waiting Too Long

Here's the paradox: the anxiety around payroll transitions makes firms want to delay the decision. But delaying the decision is exactly what makes transitions riskier. Call it the January Trap: the more a firm waits for the "right" moment to feel calm enough to start, the less time it leaves itself to actually get ready, and the more the go-live starts to resemble the very disaster it was trying to avoid.

For the firm that doesn't have the bandwidth right now, waiting doesn't create bandwidth later — it borrows against it. December is year-end close, W-2 prep, and the busiest month on the calendar for whoever owns your books. Layering a system transition on top of that isn't finding time that didn't exist before; it's asking an already-stretched controller or administrator to do two demanding jobs at once, at the exact moment neither can afford to be rushed.

And it isn't just your firm racing the clock. January is the single busiest payroll implementation date in the industry — nearly every company that's ever going to switch tries to do it at once. Firms that commit in September or October get dedicated attention on a timeline built around their needs. Firms that wait until November or December aren't just compressing their own process; they're competing for the same limited implementation capacity as every other firm trying to hit the same date, at a moment when that capacity is stretched thinnest.

None of what goes wrong in a rushed transition is a failure of the technology. It's the predictable result of a compressed timeline — the data that didn't get double-checked, the parallel run that got skipped "just this once," the employee question nobody had a good answer for because nobody had time to prepare one. The firms that go live confidently in January aren't the ones who moved fastest. They're the ones who separated the decision from the work — who committed early enough that "smooth" was actually possible, instead of hoping for it under pressure.

*For the full month-by-month planning timeline see BQE's companion piece, the [**2027 A/E Payroll Planning Guide**](#).*



The takeaway isn't "you must decide in September specifically." It's that the earlier you separate the decision to switch from the work of switching, the more time you have to do the work of switching well.

How BQE Makes Implementation Predictable

BQE's implementation process for CORE Payroll is built to answer the failure causes, fears, and common hesitations described above directly — including the one challenge many firms don't say out loud: not having the internal bandwidth to run a transition alone.

Migration Concierge: a dedicated point of contact assigned to your firm from day one, so ownership never splits across several people and never changes hands mid-project — and so the burden doesn't fall entirely on an already-stretched administrator or controller at your firm. Your concierge works backward from a realistic go-live date, guides the data audit before it becomes a paycheck problem, and surfaces A/E-specific quirks — job-cost-coded reimbursements, multi-state registrations, prevailing wage classifications — during setup instead of after go-live. For firms with public-sector work, that means wage classifications get built into how the system applies rates automatically, not left for someone to re-derive from memory on every project.

Payroll Guarantee: Our implementation team works with you before the first payroll is issued, to validate the system setup and data accuracy. This step catches discrepancies before they reach a live paycheck. And we stick with you after go-live, to ensure the first few pay periods go smoothly and any potential errors are fixed. We are truly partners in your success.

White Glove January: dedicated monitoring through your first two to three live pay cycles, plus support materials to help you tell employees what to expect before they have to ask — so the person who owns payroll internally isn't carrying that first stretch alone, either.

Together, these close the same gaps that show up again and again in the failure causes and horror stories above, not because the technology is different, but because the process around it is.

The Real Decision Isn't "Should We Switch"

Most firms don't avoid a payroll change because they doubt the value of integrated payroll. Whether the hesitation comes from a bad experience, a bad rumor, genuine complexity, a system that isn't broken yet, or simply not having the bandwidth to think about it — underneath all five, the real fear is the same: what the three months between "deciding" and "live" will look like.

That's a fair fear, and it's also a solvable one. A payroll transition doesn't have to be a leap of faith. With CORE Payroll, it's a series of well-planned, well-communicated, well-tested steps, each one reducing risk instead of adding to it. Plus, BQE absorbs the overlap cost of running two systems during that transition, so getting it right doesn't mean paying twice to do it.

The firms that look back on their payroll transition and shrug — "it was honestly kind of uneventful" — aren't the ones who got lucky. They're the ones who started early, cleaned up their data, kept one owner on the project from start to finish, tested before they trusted, and told their people what to expect.

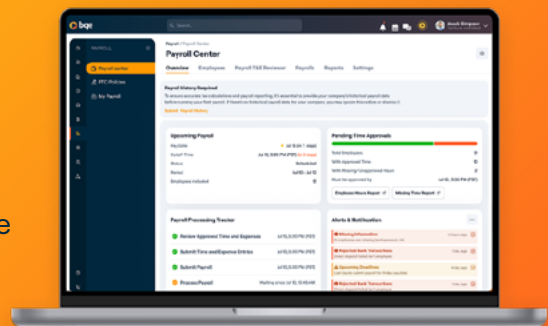
Either way, the conversation itself takes minutes. The planning is what takes months — which is exactly why it's worth starting now.

Getting Started

If everything in this guide points to "yes, this fall," the next step doesn't need to be complicated.

Already a customer? Talk to your BQE account representative or customer success manager. They're the fastest path to learn more about CORE Payroll.

New to CORE? If you are still considering CORE as your all-in-one firm management platform, book a demo to see how CORE Payroll is integrated into the full suite of business tools.



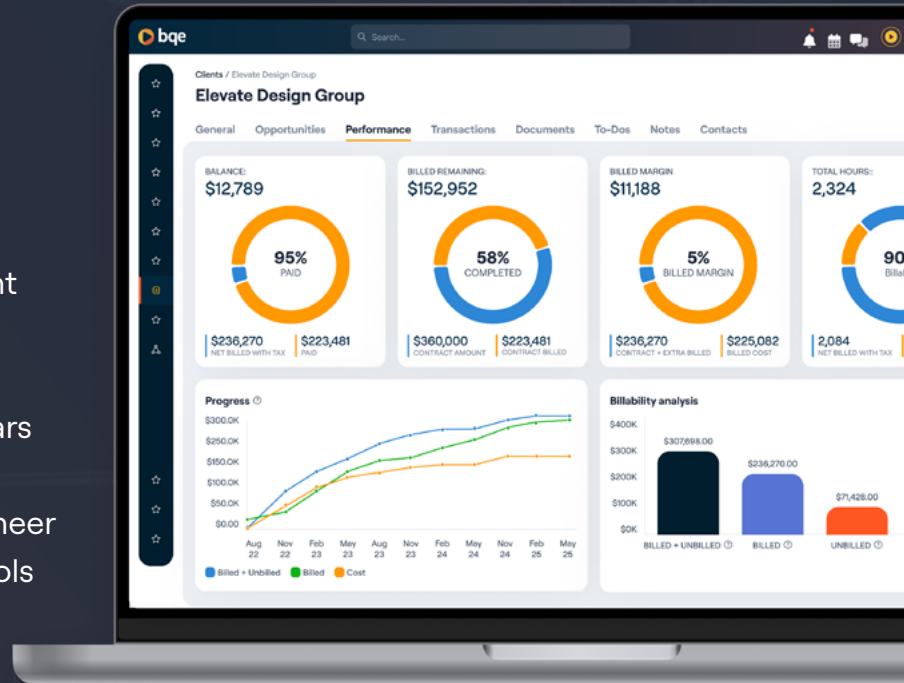
[TO LEARN MORE, BOOK A DEMO →](#)

BQE CORE

If you're serious about improving efficiency and profitability, you need access to technology that makes the process of tracking Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) straightforward. BQE CORE is an all-in-one firm management platform with integrated accounting and project management tools that's backed by a company with over 30 years of experience and countless end users worldwide. It was designed by an engineer and architect to give their firms the tools they needed to thrive. Thus all of the built-in features are designed to address the pain points A/E firms typically face.

BQE CORE can streamline your business processes, while simultaneously providing groundbreaking insights that will help grow your firm, all from the convenience of a desktop computer, laptop, or mobile device. BQE CORE makes it easier than ever to collaborate with both your team and clients.

Running your business should be exciting, not chaotic. That's why we're here, and most importantly, why we developed CORE.



[TO LEARN MORE, BOOK A DEMO →](#)