

Sports Geek Nation AMA with David Payne

David Payne is the Senior Technology Strategist for the University of Oklahoma Athletics IT.

David has been working at the University of Oklahoma for almost 15 years. He first started in the academe, teaching introductory sociology and upper-level wealth, power and prestige courses. He eventually moved into the athletics department providing game day support on the IT operations of the athletics department. In 2011, David became the Director of IT for the OU Athletics Department where he works on improving the operations and developing, implementing and administering the policies and procedures related to technology in the athletics department.

David is also part of the SEAT Executive Advisory Board. SEAT or Sports & Entertainment Alliance in Technology is an annual unique and educational conference for sports & entertainment industry attended by professionals around the world.

Connect with David Payne on [LinkedIn](#) and Slack [@paynehouse](#)

Find out more about University of Oklahoma Athletics at soonersports.com

Here's the full transcript:

Links to names will link you into Slack community, if you are not a member [please sign up here](#).

Q. [seancallanan](#): IT moves so quickly these days, a two part question from me. How do you keep up with the changes over the years? And what is your biggest technology pain point right now?

A. [paynehouse](#): Those are great questions! First I would say that I like to learn new things. As a technology person, my curiosity and desire to learn has often exposed me to emerging technologies, but that is driven more by being a tech geek than by anything strategic. In my early efforts to be strategic about about keeping up, I embarked on an extensive journey of reading, attending industry-specific trade conferences, and networking with peers. Today I rely heavily on peer network forums like Sports Geek, SEAT and a peer group of US College Athletics IT leaders to help guide my learning. One of the really great things about technology is that it often emerges and changes the world around you. It has been transforming life, culture and humanity since the beginning of time. The early hunters and gatherers had to constantly hunt just to survive. But eventually they developed better hunting weapons and gathering techniques and were able to begin accumulating more at once than they needed for that day. This sparked innovation to develop better storage techniques. These changes resulted in more discretionary time for some to focus on leisure, the arts, or more innovation. These types of technological advances seem more

sophisticated today but are almost always born out of the same desire to do something faster, better, easier or more efficiently. Even though I have rambled on for a bit, none of what I have said is earth shattering or revolutionary. The point is that keeping up requires actively seeking information. In the sports and entertainment industry, clubs and teams are always trying to get better at what they do. Vendors are developing new solutions to current industry problems. Putting myself in a position to learn how other teams or industries do their business and tracking when/why they make changes helps keep me up with trends.

My answer to the second question is closely linked to the first. The biggest pain point for me, right now, is making big spends at the right time to make sure I get the most out of my investment. Technology is often very expensive but is constantly changing. When I make a big spend, I want to make sure I am going to get the desired return out of my investment before it becomes obsolete. Staying current and tracking trends takes a fair amount of the pain out of it. A real-life example of this can be seen in our stadium wi-fi project. The new wireless standard 802.11AX is going to drastically improve the wireless connectivity experience in congested, high density places. The enterprise version of this new standard will be available to order any day now with delivery promised at some time during the summer. For us, we have a short time window as our first home game of the new season is September 1. We know that we can order the currently available 802.11 AC standard today and receive it in time to have a wireless experience for the upcoming season. We also know that it will perform well in our environment for the next year or two. Within the next year, however, new consumer devices are being manufactured to utilize the new standard and will start to come into our stadium. I don't want to pay millions of dollars for something that could possibly deliver a degraded experience in a couple of years when I should be able to expect a five to seven year lifecycle for my investment. My "real-life" problem is a problem of timing between the start of a season and when a product is available in this case but the same problem of cost applies to most technology purchases whether we are talking about hardware, custom software or cloud solutions and there is rarely a straightforward or easy answer.

Q. [sophiemoore](#): Hi @paynehouse,

Obviously working with so many stakeholders in mind takes a lot of negotiation and compromise. Are there any IT requests/initiatives you are able to share that certain sports, venues, or athlete bodies have come to you with that have come to pass?

A. [paynehouse](#): Hello @sophiemoore thanks for that question. I can think of a few initiatives we have launched recently. One that lends itself to easily sharing comes from the business side and started with a growing need to own and manage our data. I could make this response really short and just say we built what we called at that time a data warehouse and implemented a CRM. But there is obviously more to that story than just buying some technology products. We didn't launch that initiative because those were the hot topics at trade conferences. We launched it because we needed to solve a problem. In our case, our

structure worked organizationally but created challenges for us operationally. The way a typical U.S. college athletic department is structured lends itself to a fair amount of silo work. We have a ticket sales department, a fundraising/donor department, clubs/suites/premium seating liaison, a rights/sponsorship partner, a digital media department and a marketing department that all work with similar data sourced from different places. All of those departments would collect and maintain their own data but would not necessarily have insight into the data gathered by other departments. Our task was to work with each of the areas and come up with a viable data aggregation and reporting solution that gave us better insight into our operations as well as the engagement level of our fans. Negotiation and compromise continue to be very important activities in the successful implementation of this initiative. We are constantly negotiating with each of the departments, listening to their needs, modifying our approach and evaluating together how to ingest and categorize disparate points of data so that they are useful and making each of the groups aware of what data is available for reporting. This initiative is in its second year and has begun to generate benefits including a much more unified and coordinated effort at engaging fans and gathering data. This has helped us make it easier for our fans to engage. A couple of others include a shift to mobile for player analysis (video) and communication and a move to cloud for digital asset management.

Q. [jase](#): Hi @paynehouse - would you consider the typical college fan/event engagement strategy similar to that of an elite league (NFL/NBA) but on a smaller scale or are there digital activations or engagement needs that are different in college sports.

A. [paynehouse](#): Hello Jason, I think that the strategies are very similar. We have a football stadium with just over 86,000 seats that will sell out six or seven Saturdays a year. That is just one sport but I think the engagement approach would be very similar to what an NFL team does for a ten game home schedule in somewhat smaller stadiums. We have a very successful team and a rich tradition that helps fill the stadium. In addition to the loyal fans who have followed the teams for years, we also have 35,000 plus students per year on campus who may want to identify with their school team as part of their student life experience and alumni who move on from college into a career and geographic location distant from the team. Because of this I would identify a difference unique to the University environment is engaging students/alumni to develop them as lifelong fans and possibly both ticket buyers as well as potential donors. Engaging students through sports events as part of the campus education experience can evoke powerful memories from a developmental time that they can look back on fondly. This potentially sparks even greater participation as a fan when they move into their career beyond University. Every college will do this differently but they will engage students and alumni in the hopes of gaining support beyond the tuition dollar.

Q. [Rick](#): Hi @paynehouse totally agree that having that natural curiosity for tech solutions and desire to learn, can lead you to the right places. My question is actually from a reader of

mine (I write weekly articles about sports topics on LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/today/author/ricnunez>) who emailed me on the weekend and essentially has an issue with jobs age discrimination in the sports industry. It was very surprising to me, as some of the leaders in sports business in terms of tech and innovation are older. This reader (who is quite experienced in PR and media in college sports) has found that when he approaches people about work, they see, to them, this old guy in his 50s. Their thought is, he is behind the times, he can't know about new media. But he has presented ideas to schools and groups on modern communication tactics, and they said "Sounds good" and then go hire someone young, who doesn't know how to truly communicate.

Do you have any advice from what you see in the college landscape in the US? Ill be sure to pass on any of your thoughts. Thanks

A. paynehouse: Hello Rick, This is a good but difficult question for me to ponder as an old guy in his 50s who happens to work in sports. I am aware of the many different articles over the past few years that have highlighted ageism in the workforce in general but also even more persistent in tech. I experienced a bit of this myself recently when I was talking with a professional team about an opening they had posted. (Personal disclosure: I sometimes think I would like to transition to a professional team and focus on one sport/venue/business.) During this conversation I detected a small bit of what I would categorize as embarrassment as they almost apologetically confessed they thought I might be overqualified for their position. While I felt this had more to do with their expectations and their structure, it hit me that experience can be both a good and a bad thing. It is a sobering thought.

I can't speak directly to your reader's experience or qualifications but I do have a personal strategy that is informed anecdotally by my own experience. When I think about making a transition as an experienced veteran in the industry, I think relationships and peer networks would be one of the most important factors. I have a resume that makes me look accomplished and qualified without drawing attention to my age. It focuses only on my most recent and relevant experiences. I develop my own brand through hard work and seek to gain some recognition/notoriety through my participation in professional networks like this one. But when it comes right down to it, I am an older guy in what seems to be a young person's industry. I look at my sports business journey that started when I was approaching 40. I did not enter this industry with aspirations of making it a career. I started as a non-traditional, older student who had returned to school to complete a Ph.D. and pursue a career in academia. I needed to make some extra money so I found a student job answering trouble calls at the Athletics department help desk. This job fit my class schedule and gave me an outlet to exercise my tech curiosity. While I worked in this job, however, my previous non-tech career experience in management, leadership, and working on a team equipped me to take advantage of opportunities as they came. I finished my Ph.D. coursework, wrote and defended comprehensive exams before I seriously considered

pursuing this as a career. While I was working on my degree in a different discipline I was also learning the sports business. I was networking with peers and learning from them. I was tracking trends and continuing to learn the language of the business. My path was non-traditional but my doorway was at the lowest entry level. One of the drawbacks of experience is money and we don't want to give away our hard earned expertise without being properly compensated for it. In a college environment there are young people being trained to move into the modern workplace. There are experienced people who want to move into higher positions with more responsibility. There is what I would call an "ecosystem" in place that undoubtedly makes it difficult for someone coming from outside the industry. That means competition and the bottom line are factors to contend with as well as ageism. My advice is pretty general and emerges out of my own life philosophy - focus most of my energy on what I can control. I read a quote from philosopher Eric Hoffer about 20 years ago that has stuck with me - "In times of change, learners inherit the earth while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists." I can control my knowledge by constantly learning. I can network with other professionals and build relationships whenever possible. And finally, I can learn some more. I am not even close to knowing everything I need to know to be good at what I do and I always need to learn more.

Rick: Great insight @paynehouse appreciate your candor on this subject of ageism. I'll be sure to pass on your advice from your own personal journey.

Just wanted to add that I'm a big believer in knowledge and constantly learning. I also rely on networking and relationships to advance.

Again appreciate your honesty & loved the Eric Hoffer quote - will remain true for many decades to come.

What is Sports Geek Nation?

Been forwarded this from a colleague? That's great we love seeing our members get credit for sharing their knowledge. Sports Geek Nation is a curated sports business community in Slack and Facebook which will help you learn from the very best in the world. Sports Geek Nation was founded by Sean Callanan in 2015 (as #SportsBiz Slack), it connects sports executives who work in digital, data and technology.

Sports Geek Nation has members from (in alphabetical order) Australia, Canada, Denmark, India, Lithuania, New Zealand, Sweden, United Kingdom and United States working in sports such as basketball, football, ice hockey, baseball, AFL, horse racing, golf, rugby league, netball and more.

You can join Sports Geek Nation by going to SportsGeekNation.com