

Bob: Hello and welcome to The Illinois Professional, a campaign created by Illinois Human Resources to showcase the diverse ways that employees carry out and support the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign mission. With all the innovations happening all over the U of I, some folks maintain a constant atmosphere in our spaces. And ever notice how a familiar campus building can suddenly feel brand-new between Friday and Monday?

I'm Bob Dignan. And in this podcast we'll be chatting with Tony Kite, a building service worker with over 20 years of experience at the University.

Tony was awarded the 2020 chancellors Distinguished Staff Award. The award is designed to annually recognize civil service staff employees for their exceptional accomplishments and service to the university. Through this program, outstanding performance is encouraged in all civil service staff employees as they strive to win this prestigious award. Enjoy these few minutes with Tony. Tony, thank you so much for joining the podcast.

Tony: Well, thank you.

Bob: So we're here to talk about all things you because you're an award winner. Congratulations.

Tony: Well, thank you.

Bob: CDSA, that's a that's a pretty cool honor. Do do you keep paint us a picture for when you found out that you were nominated or that you won when you won the award? Like what was that like?

Tony: Well, one day my boss called me and was asking some, what I thought to be kind of strange questions. And so about two or three questions and I ask him, Well, why are you asking? Then he informed me that I had been nominated for the award. And then a few months after that, I was actually received a phone call telling me that I had won the award.

Bob: So you're sort of thinking this is fishy.

Tony: Absolutely. Did not seem normal. Right?

Bob: So if this is the abnormal, I'm curious because the benefit of this series of conversations that we're having is we are going around and were talking to people about what they do across the campus. And I've learned a lot throughout this series because there are so many nooks and crannies and things that are going on to keep keep just the, the whole machine moving and the entity and the family kinda moving forward at this university. So what is the normal? Could you, rather than me butchering it, could you describe what your job is and how long you've been here and some of the unique aspects of it.

Tony: I am a building service worker. I have been at the university since September of 1997. I currently work in the Coordinated Science Lab. And I had been in on this job since August of 2014. And basically, I keep building clean, dumped trash. You know. There's just so many individual things that come into play. But basically, bottom line is, I keep the building preservable.

Bob: Nice. That's gotta be an important role in a, in a research lab where they're doing lots of different things up there. Was that kind of interesting to come on to that scene.

Tony: It's it's a nice building to work in. A very nice place to work. I don't have a lot of the things that are not very attractive in this building. For instance, cleaning classrooms is not a lot of fun. It's a lot of work. There aren't any classrooms in this building. It's mostly all just office space with the that's research labs in the basement, robotics labs, things like that. So it, it's interesting.

Bob: I like that and I would imagine all the, all the classroom management is way different now during the semesters, during the pandemic?

Tony: Yes. The entire job is completely different than what it was a year ago.

Bob: What prompted you to want to work at the university so many years ago you, you're talking about 97 holy cow.

Tony: Honestly. It was the benefits. And back then, there were a lot of small businesses going out of business and, you know, shutting factories down. Lot of things like that, and go into work somewhere that's been around for over a 100 years. I doubt they're going to shut us down anytime soon. So there was a little bit of job security there. And out in the outside world, you cannot come close to the benefits that we have here at the university.

Bob: So that was the initial attraction, but you're going on over 20 years. So what's kind of kept you here that long?

Tony: I've tried getting other positions here within the university and haven't had much luck at that. But I really enjoy working for the university and in the outside world. It's, it's a whole different ballgame.

Bob: Definitely. You're talking about kind of the building that you're, that you're assigned to being your mission. And I think about I was located in a different building than I am, I am now. And it was I've always had great relationships with building service workers in that former building and great to catch up with every day and and talk and kind of like, I don't know, at least from my perspective, that role seems like that's a constant presence that can uplift and keep the building kind of going, keep the culture of the building going. And I wonder how you see your role fitting into the mission of the university, but big mission that we're all here supporting.

Tony: Well, I kind of consider myself an ambassador of the building. I do a lot more of that. Just keep things clean. Before this pandemic, I saw the same people every day. And you have conversations with them and, you know, it's not just a job that he come to. You have a relationship with these people and they ask you how your kids are, how was your weekend, all that. So it's really yeah. You kind of get to know each other on a personal basis. A lot of BSW's work either in the evenings or in the middle of the night. So you'll see people in certain buildings. They have no idea who cleans the building. Fortunately, I work during the day time, so I'm having encounter with the customers. And it's it's a lot more personal than just coming in after everybody leaves and tidying up and then leave and before they show up again.

Bob: Did you ever work those later shifts?

Tony: Absolutely. Everybody does. Nobody starts working days.

Tony: When I started working, you could plan on working 15 to 20 years before you got a day job.

Bob: Was that your experience? 15? No, because I had been.

Tony: No, I made it quite a bit sooner than that. Things have changed a lot since when I started. When I started, probably 85% of BSWs either worked in the evening or in the middle of the night. Very few of them work during the day. And that's kind of been restructured since then. And there's a lot more people working during the daytime and a lot of things have changed over.

Bob: That's got to be that's got to be a welcomed change for the good because I don't claim to be an expert in this, but I do know that shift work is just very hard on the body. Those later shifts.

Tony: Absolutely.

Bob: I'm glad to hear that as a whole is going further and further into the into the workday. That's great.

Tony: Oh, yes. Yes. Much more enjoyable.

Bob: So, one of the things that we've been asking people is if you can think of a day or a time or a moment, that you felt most proud to be a professional working for the University of Illinois. Can you think of one of those and what would it be?

Tony: Would probably be we come in on the weekends and do floor work. And so basically come in work ten hours on Saturday, ten hours on Sunday. And the difference we could make over just working a couple days. And one instance, we did the floors here in this building that I am assigned to. So I worked all weekend on the floors and then I was there Monday when everybody showed up and they were astonished at how everything changed, you know, over the weekend. So that was that was nice.

Bob: That kind of fits into what you were describing earlier. Some of your purview is behind the scenes and kind of over the weekend, night or behind the scenes type work by. It's very evident when it doesn't happen, right? When that role is not being played. Or like you said, with the floors and redoing floors, if that's being neglected for years and years and years, it starts to wear on the building and the people that are in the building. But for, for you and your team members to be kind of like, I don't know, superheroes almost of you come through in the middle of the night or weekend. And then the whole building has a new feel—has been rejuvenated. I know that's how it felt when the floors rebuffed recently in another building on campus. It's like, whoa, this feels like a fresh building.

Tony: Yes.

Bob: There's gotta be some kind of camaraderie that's felt one-year bonding together across ten hour days.

Tony: Oh, yeah.

Bob: That's great. We're asking people also sort of if there are interesting or unique aspects of your job. I think there's a tendency to underplay what goes on in the day or the assignments of a BSW and this is a chance for people to kind of learn what are some of the things that are... You talk about, like

you got your usual stuff. But what are the more interesting, unique things that come across your path that now it's like, oh, now I'm handling this.

Tony: There's so many of them. In my time here at the university, I've done a lot of different... I used to do moving crew a lot. I was working evenings and the only way that I had to work days was to volunteer for a moving crew, which was a temporary position. So I did that as much as possible just so I could work days. And it's really a different view of the university from an ordinary BSW job. You know, doing setups, when the governor comes to town, setting up the stage for that, we'll set up the stage for commencement every year, doing a lot of different public function, as well as moving and you are really in touch with what was going on as far as new buildings being opened up or buildings being remodeled, relocating people so that they could do the construction and things like that. And as well as at 1point, the people who were trained to do floors were offered overtime on the weekends or evenings. So I got myself trained on floors so I could be part of that. And I've also done the same with the carpet, cleaning carpets kind of specialized little niche and I sought out the training so that I was able to do that work as well. So, I've I've kind of dipped my toes in a lot of different places around too. I've seen probably a lot more than your average BSW because I've moved around to different positions and I don't know just trying to keep it interesting, I guess.

Bob: Yeah, definitely. You said you could smell that things are a little different when your boss is asking those questions for the nomination about how you found out. But I gotta ask how how did it feel getting this award and being worked here for 23 years and being recognized in this way. How does, how does that feel?

Tony: It feels great. A lot of times doing this kind of work. It's just natural that you would feel unappreciated. You know, if you're working in the middle of the night, how would you feel any other way? You get to go home at the end of your shift and come back again tomorrow. So it's nice to get some appreciation. Definitely.

Bob: That's a big component of that. And that's also motivation to having this series and talking to people to remind you and remind others that, you know, all of these roles that were playing and especially what you're describing in terms of the role in the life of a BSW, that's hugely vital for the university. And like I was mentioning in terms of relationships and, and just that camaraderie coming into a building. But then also the way that you can make a building feel new and make a space be inviting. So hopefully you can see that both through this award, but then also through your daily experience.

Tony: Absolutely.

Bob: Well, Tony, thanks so much for taking some time. And hopefully through the pandemic and afterwards, your time and your role continues to bring you that that satisfaction.

Tony: Well, thank you.

Bob: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Illinois professional. If interested in nominating someone for a campus staff award, there's a link in the description with more information. And be sure to follow @IllinoisHR on Twitter for informational and inspirational posts.