



SPRINGFIELD
Business
JOURNAL

August 2024

**Del's Popcorn Shop still
popping after 90 years**

Q&A With Bruce Sommer

Stay Ahead of the Game: Why Continuous Tax Planning is Crucial to Your Financial Success

By Emmanuel Davis, Owner, TPH Strategies (Formerly Tax Partners Holdings)

Like spring cleaning or a check-up with your doctor, many people think of tax preparation as a once-a-year chore. But effective tax planning should be a continuous process throughout the year. Your tax preparer should be more than just someone who helps you file your taxes; they should be a strategic financial partner invested in your success. Year-round tax planning can help you manage changes in income and expenses and ensure your finances are handled in the most tax-advantageous way.

The benefits speak for themselves:

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Year-round tax planning allows you to take control of your finances proactively. By regularly reviewing your financial situation, your tax preparer can identify opportunities for tax savings and help you make informed decisions about your income, investments, and expenses.

2. Maximizing Deductions & Credits

Tax laws are complex and constantly changing. A dedicated tax planner stays up to date with the latest regulations and can ensure you maximize available deductions and credits. This means more money in your pocket and a lot less stress during tax season.

3. Managing Life Changes

Major life events, such as getting married, having a child, buying a home, or starting a business can significantly impact your tax situation. Year-round planning ensures that your tax strategy adapts to these changes, helping you avoid surprises and plan for future expenses.

4. Avoiding Penalties & Interest

By planning ahead, you can avoid common pitfalls such as underpayment penalties and interest charges. Regular check-ins with your tax advisor ensure you are on track with estimated payments and that your withholding is accurate.

5. Enhancing Cash Flow

Effective tax planning can improve your cash flow by understanding the amount of tax withheld from your paycheck or by optimizing your quarterly estimated tax payments. This means more valuable funds for personal or business use throughout the year.

6. Business Growth & Expansion

For business owners, year-round tax planning is essential to sustainable growth. Your tax advisor can help you with budgeting, forecasting, and identifying tax-saving opportunities that support your business's expansion.

Year-round tax planning services are designed to provide you with proactive financial management, help you maximize deductions, navigate life changes, and enhance your overall financial health.

Contact your accountant and ask about tax planning services. If you don't have an accountant or this isn't a service offered, we're happy to help.

At TPH Strategies, we are your trusted advisor and we're dedicated to your financial success. After 40 years in business, we are proud to deliver our expertise and exceptional customer service to individuals and business owners in the Springfield area. We are committed to offering personalized

advice tailored to your unique situation, ensuring you handle your finances in the most tax-advantageous way.



Emmanuel Davis is the dedicated owner of TPH Strategies, driven by a passion for empowering individuals and businesses to maximize their financial potential.

Recognizing the complexities of taxes and bookkeeping, Emmanuel leads TPH Strategies to offer clear, strategic guidance and support.

With a proactive year-round approach, Emmanuel ensures his clients are always prepared and positioned for success. His commitment to helping others is evident in his personalized service and the trust he builds with his clients. He takes pride in demystifying financial strategies, enabling clients to make informed decisions and achieve their goals.

Before leading TPH, Emmanuel's career had taken him to manage tax and accounting processes for organizations with highly complex structures and financial needs, from venture capital to public accounting. His experience positions him well to tackle a variety of tax and business challenges.

Emmanuel holds an MBA from University of Illinois Springfield and a bachelor of science in accounting from Millikin University. ■

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The only thing constant is change

Nothing makes you feel quite as old as seeing the memorabilia from your formative years in a museum. Last year's "Growing Up X" exhibit at the Illinois State Museum could have been largely furnished by the contents of my childhood home. And seeing relics such as payphones and console TVs was a stark reminder that technology has evolved at such a rapid pace that just a few decades later these items are largely unfamiliar to young people.

Those of us over the age of 40 would excel at some of the current TikTok challenges, such as dialing a rotary phone and writing your name without lifting the pen. Not only was I part of a generation that still learned cursive in school, we were taught to write using fountain pens, which now seems on par with dipping a quill in ink. I did manage to acquire some modern skills along the way, including a typing class my sophomore year of high school that ranks among the most useful things I learned in school. But at the time, it was hard to imagine that virtually every white-collar profession would involve spending hours a day on a personal computer. We were still taking notes for research papers on index cards and Chromebooks hadn't even been invented, much less automatically issued to every student from kindergarten on up.

Gen X could be considered the "sandwich generation" when it comes to technology, since we came of age during the early stages of personal computers and the internet, as opposed to Baby Boomers, who had to adapt as adults, and later generations who were born into a world of smartphones and Google. As a recent article in Media Culture notes, we "witnessed the transition from analog to digital, and experienced firsthand the evolution of technology from a luxury to a daily necessity."

This month's technology issue of SBJ deals with topics such as bitcoin (p. 16) and artificial intelligence (p. 24). Many of us in the workforce today may have only a rudimentary understanding of how these emerging technologies work, and even less of an understanding of how they might be relevant to our daily lives. Back in 2016, the World Economic Forum predicated a fourth industrial revolution was at hand, declaring, "We stand on the brink of a technological revolution that will fundamentally alter the way we live, work and relate to one another."

Whether we are eager to embrace these changes or are reluctant to adapt to new technologies, the reality is that the workplace will look very different in five or 10 years. And no matter how awed we are by the latest and greatest technology gizmo, it too, will end up in a museum someday.



Michelle Ownbey, publisher



Editor: Fletcher Farrar
fletcher@springfieldbusinessjournal.com

Publisher: Michelle Ownbey
michelle@springfieldbusinessjournal.com

Associate Publisher: James Bengfort
jbengfort@illinoistimes.com

Copy Editor: Daron Walker
daron@springfieldbusinessjournal.com

Production Design: Brandon Turley
bturley@illinoistimes.com

Advertising:

Yolanda Bell
yolanda@springfieldbusinessjournal.com
217-679-7802

Beth Parkes-Irwin
beth@springfieldbusinessjournal.com
217-679-7803

Ron Young
ron@springfieldbusinessjournal.com
217-679-7807

Subscriptions:

springfieldbusinessjournal.com/subscribe
subs@springfieldbusinessjournal.com

August Contributors:

Zach Adams	Thomas C. Pavlik
David Blanchette	Janet Seitz
Annie Fulgenzi	Holly A. Whisler
Kelly Gust	Ed Wojcicki
Dean Olsen	

Address: P.O. Box 398, Springfield, IL 62705

Phone: 217-726-6600

Email: info@springfieldbusinessjournal.com

Facebook: facebook.com/SBJIllinois

Twitter: twitter.com/sbjmonthly

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a
Q & A
with
Bruce Sommer

By David Blanchette

Bruce Sommer is the director of economic development and innovation at University of Illinois Springfield where he also teaches entrepreneurship and innovation. He has worked with inventors, entrepreneurs, faculty and institutional leaders from around the world assisting in ideation, design and execution of a variety of applied innovations.

Bruce is a founding council member of the Illinois Innovation Network, founding member of the Angel Capital Association and member of the National Commission on Innovation and Competitiveness Frontiers.

Additionally, Bruce is a startup entrepreneur and seed investor who founded three companies and helped lead investments in more than 40 early-stage companies. He is the managing partner of NextGen Ventures, a closely-held private equity and venture capital fund focused on nascent technologies across a variety of industries. Locally, he is a cofounder of Innovate Springfield, Sangamon CEO and founder of Kindling Fund, missioned to build economically strong communities through individual empowerment and new venture creation.

Where were you born and raised, and what was your first job?

I was born and raised in Springfield, and technically my first job was when I was 9 years old, emptying garbage cans at the family business. My first job after college was as an accountant at Boulder Medical Center in Boulder, Colo.

How did you become interested in your current career field?

In late 1999, I was in graduate school getting ready to take my Medical College Admissions Test, and I put together a business plan as part of an MBA class I was taking. One of my professors suggested that I enter the plan in a business plan competition. As any good business student would do, I did the math on the probability of winning the \$25,000 prize money and then delaying medical school for one more year.

I won the business plan competition, got my internet-based company funded, launched it, sold it and then started two more after that. After selling my third one I started investing in startup companies and have been around technology companies ever since.

So would you say that you received an accidental introduction to your career?

I was initially attracted to helping people through medicine, so I thought I could be an average doctor at best, or I could have more impact in the business field by helping to create companies, working with entrepreneurs and investing in startups.

How receptive is the traditionally conservative community of Springfield to new ideas and ways of doing business?

I've been lucky to live in many more progressive areas than Springfield, areas that are early adopters of technology and community development. When I first came back to Springfield I noticed an inhibition, a lack of risk-taking. When the dean of the college business school asked me to teach an entrepreneurship class, I recognized that the students here were much different than other students I had been around – their ideas may have been constrained by the culture they grew up in.

That's why we decided to focus on high school students, to get them started before they get to college and open their minds to opportunities in and beyond Springfield. So we launched the incubator to help them celebrate new ideas, go to a place with like-minded people and help them get the resources to launch a business. It may take generations, but I think our community will greatly benefit from these efforts.



Bruce Sommer, center, presented awards to faculty and students across the 13 innovation hubs in Illinois at the Illinois Innovation Network's Innovator of the Year Competition in Springfield. PHOTOS COURTESY OF BRUCE SOMMER

What challenges do innovators face and how can those be overcome?

The amazing thing right now is that artificial intelligence can be added to your skill set and practices to meet many of those challenges. AI allows us to focus on the creative process and it handles more of the mundane work that we do. It also gives us some nice creative resources.

It is a very competitive market for venture capital dollars, but there are all kinds of opportunities here in Springfield to help people advance their companies. There's never been a bigger opportunity than right now. This is the next big wave, especially with AI, and there are a lot of resources out there to start a business. If you have the talent and the ingenuity, we've created a network here in Springfield to connect innovators with other talented folks.

What state of mind and skill set do successful innovators and entrepreneurs need?

Curiosity and empowerment. You need to be emboldened and have the drive to chase that curiosity. Also, the ability to network with resources and people. Curiosity leads to collaborations with other people that may be doing similar things or helping to solve similar problems.

How do you decide which startups you wish to support?

I support the ones that provide some intrinsic value that align with my social missions. Right now, it's AI, alternative energy, sustainable farming methods, things that have a material impact on society.

It seems like there's something new and improved being announced every day. Is there no end to the possibilities that are open for those who want to start something new?

I haven't seen an end to it yet, and that's what is amazing about it. I don't understand why people

don't chase new ideas more. Thank goodness not everyone's like me, but that's the beauty of it, there's a lot of curiosity matched with opportunity out there. If you can get the resources to put you on top, you can achieve a ton of amazing things.

Is it wise to have a fallback career option, a safety net, if you're just starting out as an entrepreneur or innovator?

The number 83 I know well. Eighty-three percent of entrepreneurs start companies while they are already in a different career, which I think is wise. Younger folks that don't have kids or mortgage obligations can take on those risks. But if you have other people relying on you, then yes, I recommend another source of income and a safety net, if you will.

What advice would you give to young people today who are trying to decide if they should go to work for somebody else or venture out on their own?

Test it. Venture out on your own while you're working for someone else. See how it feels. Be sure to create a network of resources to support you. If you take that leap, if you want to catch your own fish, to experience the fruits and pitfalls of your own labor, I absolutely encourage you to do that.

Emotionally, are you risk-averse or risk-accepting? An overwhelming number of new businesses fail, so get help. When there are resources available to help mitigate the risk, go for them.

What might people be surprised to learn about you?

I have two amazing kids, and I moved back to Springfield so I could raise them near my family. They have been my most rewarding experience in life.

Gail Lorenzini Aug. 7, 1952-July 4, 2024

A champion for women

By Ed Wojcicki

Gail Lorenzini was an educator, an entrepreneur and a business owner who immersed herself into the community and took advantage of her varied points of contact to support area causes. Gail did nearly all of this in partnership with her husband, John, before she died unexpectedly July 4 at the age of 71.

Gail and John Lorenzini created the University of Spa & Cosmetology Arts in 1978, three years after their first BJ Grand Salon opened in Springfield. They recently sold the salons but kept the cosmetology school.

BJ Grand Salon and Spa, regularly recognized as a finalist in Illinois Times' annual Best of Springfield competition, grew from the initial location to nine salons and had 440 employees at one time, according to John.

Over the years, USCA has graduated more than 3,400 students who became licensed as cosmeticians, estheticians and, more recently, barbers. With about 100 to 120 students a year at USCA, John credited Gail with growing the school by handling its administration, bookkeeping and financial aid. Although the BJ salons started with hair styling, the business expanded by recognizing a market need for other services such as facials, makeup, massages and more.

Gail was nominated not once, but five times, for the prestigious Athena Leadership Award, which recognizes individuals who actively support women in attaining professional excellence and leadership skills. She won the Athena award in 2013, when it was still presented by the Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce. She and BJ Grand Salon remained active supporters of the award process when Athena transitioned from the chamber to the area chapter of Illinois Women in Leadership.

"Throughout her career, she was always very supportive of women – helping other women get to their highest potential," said Heather Burton, chair of IWIL's Athena committee. "She really exemplified what Athena means: community service, excellence in their



PHOTO COURTESY JOHN LERENZINI

career and lifting other women up."

Gail was a founding member of the local chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners, which later became Women Entrepreneurs of Central Illinois. She also partnered with the Just for You Salon at the Simmons Cancer Institute and provided furnishings for the private space where patients try on wigs.

John said his wife was passionate about helping Simmons with wigs, since many insurance companies would not pay for them, and Gail wanted to provide the chair and shampoo and everything that a person would need. BJ Grand Salon also hosted a bra-designing fundraiser, which had originated with The Wardrobe, to raise money to help people undergoing cancer treatments in Springfield and Champaign. Participants would decorate a white bra to tell a story, and BJ Grand Salon would put them on display and ask people to make a contribution to vote for their favorites.

Another one of Gail's passions, John said, was Hope School, which educates, treats

and cares for children with autism spectrum disorders and other developmental disabilities. Stylists and estheticians would assist the students with their hair and makeup for the fashion show, and the students' enthusiastic and grateful reactions thrilled the salon staff.

"We owe everything to the community, and we want to give back as much as possible and see the community grow," John said. "That's what makes Springfield so good – it's businesses that support the community."

John said Gail would make a list every year of causes they would support, then they would work together to implement it. "It's one thing to say it; it's another thing to actually do it," John said. "When she said we're going to do it, (that meant) we're going to do it."

John and Gail were married for 53 years and were business partners most of that time, pooling their backgrounds in hair styling, barbering and business. The couple have an adult son and daughter. John said their son, Nick Lorenzini, has a salon in St. Louis and their daughter, Lynne

Lowder, works elsewhere in real estate and property management. They also have three grandchildren, which, John confirmed, are the best grandchildren in the world.

Asked what she was most proud of in her career, John had a quick response. "I know she was most proud of the cosmetology students that she watched come in," he said. "Some of them did not have the greatest start in life, and she would take them from there and convince them to stay in school. She would convince them that this would work – and then she would see them owning salons and building a business. (Some were) single mothers, and she was just very proud of all the independent women who came out of the school and still live in Springfield and the surrounding communities." **SBJ**

Ed Wojcicki is a freelance writer from Springfield who retired from University Illinois Springfield and the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police.

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FORTY UNDER 40 2024

The 2024 class of Forty Under 40 was recognized at an event held July 25 at the Student Union at University of Illinois Springfield. Cathy Schwartz and John Shafer served as the keynote speakers after their daughter, Emma Shafer, was posthumously recognized with this year's Forty Under 40 class.

These individuals were selected based on their contributions to our local business community and the community in which they reside. The selectees' career paths, educational background and community affiliations are varied. They represent the best and brightest from a wide range of occupations. You can expect to hear more from and about these leaders in the years ahead.

Springfield Business Journal's longest-running awards program, which began in 1997, is able to continue due to the commitment of sponsors who realize the importance of acknowledging these up-and-coming business leaders and supporting community business programs.

To make a nomination for the 2025 class of Forty Under 40 or view a list of previous recipients, visit springfieldbusinessjournal.com/awards-program/forty-under-40.



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Del's Popcorn Shop still popping after 90 years, taking its brand worldwide

By David Blanchette



Del's Popcorn owners and management inside the Springfield store. Left to right: Production Manager Rika Rhoades; Retail Operations Manager Angel Moore; Chief Executive Officer Shelley Jacobs; Cameron Jacobs; Trudy Jacobs; Adelyn Jacobs; Robyn Jacobs; and Chief Operating Officer Tyler Jacobs. PHOTO BY DAVID BLANCHETTE

Del's Popcorn Shop is celebrating its 90th anniversary this year by taking its trademark popcorn and sweet concoctions to an ever-expanding global fan base, and the Springfield Del's location is expanding to handle the additional demand.

"Last December we became one of the top-selling products on Amazon in the popcorn category," said Del's chief operating officer Tyler Jacobs, whose family owns the business. "This expansion gives us the production and storage ability to handle all of the orders we are receiving, which may include up to 10,000 tins of popcorn alone, not counting our other products."

Those are big numbers for an operation that still uses the original 1934 recipes for its popcorn, fudge and peanut brittle that continue to draw fans from the Springfield and Decatur areas. Those numbers are likely to increase as Del's opens a downtown Chicago delivery hub and franchise stores come online.

"If anyone is within a certain radius of downtown Chicago, they'll be able to get

Del's products for quick delivery through Uber Eats, DoorDash or Grubhub. We'll be going head-to-head with some of the most popular brands in the United States," Tyler said. "It gets cooked here in Springfield and trucks with the Del's logo will drive it up to Chicago on I-55. Our products are cooked fresh, and they're meant to be eaten within a few days of production."

Company origins

Del's Popcorn has come a long way from its humble beginnings in 1934 when print-shop owner John Baldwin began cooking and selling popcorn and roasted peanuts at his Decatur business. In the 1940s, Del Barnett, who had just returned from service in World War II, joined the operation and ran it for several years before he and his wife, Emily, bought it and changed the name to Del's Popcorn Shop.

"My sister bought that shop in the 1970s and started a store in downtown Springfield in 1980," said Del's CEO Rachele "Shellie" Jacobs, one of the family business owners. "I bought

the business from her in 1984, so I've been with Del's for 40 years this year."

Shellie said the Springfield store was first located at 206 S. Sixth St. and then moved a few doors down to 213 S. Sixth St. Del's opened its current west-side location at 3013 Lindbergh Blvd. in 2012 and closed the downtown store during the pandemic in order to consolidate the Springfield locations. Del's also has a store at 100 W. Debby Drive in Mount Zion.

"We still use the same recipes that John Baldwin and Del Barnett developed," Shellie said. "We've added a few more recipes along the way, but things are all produced the same way, and we remain very customer-focused, whether you walk into one of our stores or you order online."

The owners of Del's are aware that the business has become a central Illinois institution.

"Del's has been in business for so long that as people move away from the area, they always come back to one of our retail stores

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when they are in town visiting," Shellie said. "We are happy that Del's Popcorn Shop is a must-see when those folks return."

Tried-and-true recipes

Trudy Jacobs is the largest shareholder in the family company and recently retired from working at Del's after starting there in 1979. Del Barnett's brother, Bob, passed along the Del's recipes to Trudy shortly after she started working at the family business.

"The popcorn is popped over an open flame. We keep it warm after it's popped, sprinkle on very fine salt and flavor it with warm corn oil," Trudy said. "When corn oil cools down it doesn't solidify like butter does, and that keeps the popcorn crispy for several days."

Through the years, customers keep coming back for their Del's favorites.

"Our most popular items are caramel, cheese and specially-seasoned popcorn, and of course our fudge and peanut brittle," Trudy said. "Our seasonal caramel apples are a big hit – we did 20,000 of those last year. The apples are fresh-sourced from area orchards and are all hand-dipped, wrapped and bagged. We've even rolled some of them in bacon pieces and we have poison apples for Halloween that have a darker coating and a candy worm sticking out."

Angel Moore is the retail operations manager for Del's and is based in the Mount Zion store. She makes sure that area customers are taken care of and also helps fulfill larger orders placed locally or online for occasions such as baby showers, wedding receptions and corporate gifts.

"People come into our stores and can sample many of our items to help them choose what they want, and we are also the leader in developing those larger relationships with corporations," Moore said. She also tries to accommodate special requests. "We actually had a guy come in and wanted us to hide a ring in a box of popcorn so he could propose to his fiancée," she said.

When orders come in, whether large or small, it's up to production manager Rika Rhoades to put everything together and get it shipped out in a timely manner. Rhoades has prepared and shipped orders to most states in the union, Puerto Rico and to overseas military bases.

"It can be a massive undertaking, and we can have five or six huge cookers going at once," Rhoades said. "But it's still the same 90-year-old recipe. We still put the same ingredients in copper kettles, just in much larger quantities."

Expanding to a global audience

Del's is now offering its tasty experience for a global audience by combining the nine-decades-old recipes with the latest online and social media marketing and sales tools.

"Things like the small batch, the natural ingredients, the things that make us Del's have to remain," said family member, co-owner and chief digital officer Zach Jacobs. "But every-



Del's Popcorn COO Tyler Jacobs and one of the shop's signature popcorn tins. PHOTO BY DAVID BLANCHETTE

thing we're building on top has brought the company into the 21st century. We are bringing a new world approach to what has historically been a very old-fashioned company."

How old-fashioned?

"We sold thousands of popcorn tins to people across the country this past holiday season, and we sent hand-signed letters in hand-addressed envelopes thanking each and every customer for their order," Zach said. "Those sorts of things may not be done forever, but little touches like that may help as we have opened ourselves up to 300 million potential customers versus the 200,000 who have known about us in the past."

Improved packaging was developed for Del's products, which historically have a very short shelf life, so they can retain their freshness while being transported and delivered to increasingly farther destinations. Another key to expanding the business was making the employees feel loyalty toward Del's Popcorn with full-time positions and a full-benefits package. Franchising is one more growth area for the business.

"We are developing a set of tools to make a Del's Popcorn franchise a very profitable and attractive business," COO Tyler Jacobs said. "We can ship to franchise locations the

packaging and raw goods and they can cook the products themselves for smaller customers. We can also have them take orders in their store and we can ship those orders directly from our main production centers in Springfield and Mount Zion."

Del's has also instituted fundraising programs that allow local entities such as schools to sell the products, and those goods can then

be picked up in Del's stores or shipped directly to the customer. The process eliminates the possibility that Del's products sit for long periods of time while the school tries to get the fundraising orders delivered. Del's also has a food truck in the works that can be scheduled for special events.

Then there's the popcorn itself, the raw product grown on farms. Del's purchases as much popcorn as it can from farmers in the region, but the family also grows its own corn through Jacobs Farms and uses that in many of its recipes. Jacobs Farms Popcorn has been sold on a wholesale basis since the 1970s, but the Jacobs family has reinvigorated the brand and is now selling to consumers online.

Still, at its core, Del's Popcorn Shop remains what it has been now for 90 years – a local destination for fresh, tasty treats. Trudy Jacobs said her favorite experience at Del's remains the moments when families come into one of their stores, look around and try samples.

"I still remember this wide-eyed little boy looking up at his mom and saying, 'Wow, this is a candy store,'" Trudy said. "I get a kick out of customers like that and love letting them try little samples." **SBJ**

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No more bitcoin for one Springfield business

Owner removes bitcoin ATM after witnessing multiple scams

By David Blanchette



Matthieu Fortin, owner of Upper Limits Midwest Inc., inside of his Springfield business. PHOTO BY DAVID BLANCHETTE

A Springfield man has removed a once-prominent feature of his business after he witnessed an alarming trend.

"One hundred percent of the time that we saw somebody at the machine they were being scammed," said Matthieu Fortin. "So I was like, this machine has to go. I'm not going to be a part of that."

In early June, Fortin decided to remove the bitcoin ATM that he had installed just a few months before at Upper Limits Midwest, Inc., a vape shop near the Second Street and South Grand Avenue intersection. Fortin was being paid \$300 a month by machine owner CoinFlip to have the bitcoin ATM available in his vape shop, but he no longer wanted to make it easy for scammers to prey on unsuspecting victims.

Fortin said the first person who came in to use the bitcoin ATM at his business was an elderly woman who was on the phone. The woman was trying to put thousands of dollars into the machine but was having difficulty because she didn't understand the process. Several weeks later another elderly woman came in while talking on the phone and had deposited \$5,000 of the \$10,000 she had brought with her before one of Fortin's employees stopped the woman and told her she was being scammed.

"As soon as you put the money into the bitcoin ATM it's gone, you can't get it back," Fortin said. "Scammers find these vulnerable people that aren't up on the latest technologies and they scare them on the phone, they tell them they are from the bank or the FBI and they are being watched, and they need to drop the money into this bitcoin machine."

The woman who was scammed for \$5,000 initially agreed to be interviewed for this story but later changed her mind. But Fortin gave her scammer a piece of his mind.

"I took her phone and told the scammer, 'It's up, man,' and said some not very nice words to him and told him to never call the lady back," Fortin said. "But as soon as we hung up, he called again. I was so enraged by that."

Megen Veselack is the purchasing manager at Upper Limits Midwest. She witnessed scam victims trying to use the bitcoin ATM machine and was able to stop some of them in time. Veselack was also there on the day that the machine was removed from the business.

"When the armored car people came to take cash out of the machine I said, 'All of that money was scammed from someone who looks just like your grandma,'" Veselack said.

Another Springfield vape shop, which

requested that we not use its name in this story, still has a bitcoin ATM but has taped a prominent fraud warning sign below the transaction screen to alert customers who may have been directed to the machine by scammers. A representative of the business added that someone impersonating the bitcoin machine company called recently and tried to get the business itself to deposit "seed cash" into the machine, but the business didn't fall for it.

"While cryptocurrencies can be used for legitimate purposes by law-abiding individuals, it is often used by criminals online for illicit purposes such as securities fraud, consumer and investment fraud, money laundering and extortion, to name a few," said Aaron Van Hoff, FBI Springfield cyber supervisory special agent. "It is a desirable form of payment used by criminals for its expediency and anonymity to conduct domestic and global financial transactions. Because criminals frequently request payment in cryptocurrency, it is imperative that the public be educated on the indicators of scams and fraud to protect themselves, their communities and loved ones."

A basic rule of thumb: Don't believe anyone who calls you on the phone, regardless of who they claim to be, if they ask you to take your money and put it into a cryptocurrency machine.

The FBI also warns people about newer scams where victims are approached by people who offer work-from-home, online jobs that require deposits, sometimes in cryptocurrency, of the victim's own money as part of the job. At first the victims appear to be making a salary or commission, but soon find that their money is gone.

According to Wikipedia, cryptocurrency is a digital currency designed to work as a medium of exchange through a computer network that does not rely on any central authority, such as a government or a bank, to uphold or maintain it. Bitcoin was started in 2009 and was the first cryptocurrency to be released, and since then nearly 40,000 bitcoin ATMs have been placed around the world.

According to each company's website, CoinFlip has bitcoin ATMs placed in Springfield at three convenience stores, three vape shops and a liquor store; Bitcoin Depot has machines at numerous convenience stores, a wireless phone store, grocery stores and a liquor store; Byte Federal has a machine at an international foods store; and RockitCoin has a machine at a convenience store.

FBI crime statistics for 2023 show that the agency received 1,257 cryptocurrency fraud complaints last year in Illinois totaling \$122,929,185 in losses. That's up from 875 complaints and \$56,212,989 in losses during 2022 and 900 com-

plaints and \$29,271,342 in losses during 2021. But those are just the crimes that are reported – the actual numbers are likely much higher.

In the last year-and-a-half, the Illinois Attorney General's Office has received approximately 20 complaints related to bitcoin and cryptocurrency, four of which were related to consumers who reported a scam in which they were convinced to deposit money via a cryptocurrency ATM, according to spokesperson April McLaren, who offered the following tips for consumers to avoid such scams:

Be cautious if someone who claims to be from the government, such as the IRS or FBI, contacts you and asks for payment by cryptocurrency or asks you to make a deposit into a cryptocurrency ATM. End the conversation immediately.

Be cautious if you are contacted by a bank and told there is an issue with your account that requires you to make a payment by cryptocurrency or a deposit into a cryptocurrency ATM. If you think your financial institution might be trying to contact you, contact your financial institution directly to confirm.

Contact your financial institution to stop to any suspicious transactions.

Report any suspected scams to the Attorney General's Office and the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center at www.ic3.gov.

Meanwhile, Fortin has some words of advice



for business owners who choose to keep the bitcoin ATM machines in their local establishments.

"People that are hosting these machines on their property need to stay diligent and watch what is going on," Fortin said. "If you see somebody standing by the machine talking on the phone, it's probably a scam." **SBJ**



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Sources: The companies.
Ranked by number of local employees.

	NAME/ADDRESS	PHONE/WEBSITE/EMAIL	OWNER/MANAGER	NUMBER of EMPLOYEES	NETWORKING	WEB DEV.	TELE. EQUIP.	SERVICES OFFERED	YEAR EST'D
1	Levi, Ray & Shoup, Inc. 2401 W. Monroe St. Springfield, IL 62704	217-793-3800 lrs.com Email through website contact page	Dick Levi, chairman Ryan Levi, CEO Greg Matthews, COO	322	○	○		Software development, IT staffing, technical training, infrastructure, cloud, cybersecurity, analytics. Website development: custom design, application development, content management systems, mobile apps, search engine optimization, creative services. Tech support for networks, servers and computers: network design and installation, workstation configuration, server setup. Managed IT services: remote monitoring, patch management, disaster recovery, data backup. Onsite services: computer repairs, server crash recovery, Microsoft Exchange issues.	1979
2	Lead IT Corporation 1999 Wabash Ave. Suite 210 Springfield, IL 62704	217-726-7250 leaditgroup.com hr@leaditgroup.com	Ram Talluri	152	○	○		Technology services company serving the IT needs of Fortune 500, government, mid-market and emerging companies.	2010
3	MSF&W Consulting 3445 Liberty Drive Springfield, IL 62704	217-698-3535 msfw.com info@msfw.com	Laurie King, CEO John Marucco, CSO Darrell Stoddard, CFO Brent Engelman, COO	150		○		IT consulting firm with 33 years' experience serving the public and private sectors with application development services, IT staffing, project management, data analytics, web accessibility testing and training, database administration and K-12 data solutions. Woman-owned and BEP certified.	1991
4	CDS Office Technologies 612 S. Dirksen Parkway Springfield, IL 62703	217-528-8936 cdsot.com	Mark Watson	135	○	○	○	Free network and security assessment, network planning, installation streamlining, monitoring and expansion, business continuity and disaster recovery and backup, compliance assessments (PCI, HIPAA, etc.), website design and services, system upgrades and new hardware sales/leasing and installation and cybersecurity.	1971
5	Aggieland Software, Inc. 15 S. Old State Capitol Plaza, Fl. 2 Springfield, IL 62701	224-601-5241 aggielandssoftware.com info@aggielandssoftware.com	Deepak Dhankher	64		○		Specialize in mobile and web application development. Blockchain-based technology, artificial intelligence and data analytics. Software project management (agile).	2015
6	Prairie Telecom Services 1900 E. Moffat Ave. Springfield, IL 62702	217-306-1503 prairietelecom.com jblackburn@prairietelecom.com	Jason Blackburn	30	○			Network cabling and fiber infrastructure—directional drilling for fiber/conduit placement as well as network cabling and fiber splicing.	1996
7	Agility Technologies NA 1209 S. Fourth St. Springfield, IL 62703	217-391-9290 agcomtech.com sales@agcomtech.com	Corey Taylor, president and CEO Jennifer Taylor, vice president	16	○	○	○	Structured cabling and wiring services, surveillance cameras, card access systems, managed IT services, managed hosted voice services (phone), managed cloud services, managed network security, cyber security, compliance, data backup computers, servers, security cameras, card access telephone services, managed/outsourced IT services.	2008
8	AmeriCall Communications 447 N. Walnut St. Springfield, IL 62702	217-522-2255 217-522-2257 americallinc.com pfeleton@americallinc.com	Gene Dinardo Melanie McDaniel Joe Ushman	13	○		○	Cloud-based business phone systems with mobile apps - Intercom and paging systems - Mid-to-enterprise level multi-location IP-based surveillance systems and IP-based access control - Body cam systems - IP-based door video intercom - Patient wandering systems - Structured cabling - Network hardware - Cost analysis and ROI report - Wireless access points and mesh systems - Managed services and maintenance programs.	2003
8	King Technology, Inc. 3 N. Old State Capitol Plaza Springfield, IL 62701	217-522-6700 kingtech.net kingtech@kingtech.net	M. Kay King	13	○	○	○	Network support, custom web design and development, search engine optimization (SEO) and social media marketing, custom software development and programming geographic information systems (GIS) and custom cartography, security camera systems, cloud phone systems, point-of-sale and credit card processing.	1991
9	MCS 2657 W. Lawrence Ave. Springfield, IL 62704	217-698-9900 thinkMCS.com sales@thinkmcs.com	Ryan Coultas, COO	10	○	○	○	IT services for business, web application development, data center services, disaster recovery, backups, PBX systems, server management, virtualization, Nagios-based network monitoring, support agreements, technology sales, fiber connectivity, Quickbooks hosting, cloud services, Office 365, Hosted Exchange, security audits and most IT related services.	2003
9	SEA Group, Inc. 3901 Pintail Drive, Suite A Springfield, IL 62711	217-523-1717 seagr.com info@seagr.com	Joe Marchizza	10			○	Structured cabling/network backbone/copper and fiber optics/all-voltage system solutions, IP video security solutions/door access control, nurse call solutions, sound masking/paging systems and IT consulting.	1984
9	Cave Interactive Media P.O. Box 414 Williamsville, IL 62693	217-496-6755 caveim.com hi@caveim.com	Denny Cave	10		○		Website design and development, custom web application development and WordPress-based solutions including e-commerce, multisite networks and performance-optimized hosting.	2003



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TECHNOLOGY

Sources: The companies.
Ranked by number of local employees.

	NAME/ADDRESS	PHONE/WEBSITE/EMAIL	OWNER/MANAGER	NUMBER of EMPLOYEES	NETWORKING	WEB DEV.	TELE. EQUIP.	SERVICES OFFERED	YEAR EST'D
9	Clearfire, Inc.	217-953-0321 clearfirestudios.com hello@clearfirestudios.com	Casey Reid	10		○		Custom website design, web applications development, content management systems, mobile-friendly websites, technical consulting, digital marketing, search engine optimization and creative services.	2007
10	Hanson Information Systems, Inc. 2433 W. White Oaks Drive Springfield, IL 62704	217-726-2400 hansoninfosys.com info@hansoninfosys.com	Raj Mohanty president	9	○	○	○	Equipment purchase, server co-location, on- and off-site backup, Hosted Exchange email server, DNS hosting, web hosting, website design and development, dedicated internet circuits, AT&T Partner Exchange wholesaler - Platinum Level partner, network security, financial industry and medical industry system security, penetration testing, virtual machines, antivirus and antimalware software, disaster recovery, cloud computing, Hanson Cloud Drive collaboration tool, general tech support.	1997
10	Heart Technologies 301 E. Laurel Springfield, IL 62703	217-544-3100 heart.net sfeipel@heart.net	Sheila Feipel	9	○		○	Managed services, hosted services, cloud storage, wireless networks, cyber security, infrastructure, virtualization, nurse call, fire alarm, video surveillance, access control, phone systems and hosted voice.	1987
11	Thirdwave Data/Comm, Inc. 6000 Industrial Drive Curran, IL 62670	217-544-4720 thirdwavedata.com sales@thirdwavedata.com	Brian McLean Chris Oury	8	○		○	Video surveillance system sales, service and support. Premise, hosted and cloud telephone system solutions and support. Structured cabling and fiber optic solutions for voice, data, surveillance and audio/video. Panduit, Speco, Salient, Vivotek, Axis, Eagle Eye, Avaya, Nortel, Sangamon Connect.	2002
12	Novanis IT Solutions 3161 W. White Oaks Drive, Suite 100 Springfield, IL 62704	217-698-0999 novanis.com walter.meek@novanis.com	Walter Meek	7	○			Network infrastructure, wired and wireless networks, servers, desktops, cybersecurity software, software, implementation services, technology and consulting services.	1982
12	Zion Creative 619 Clay St. Springfield, IL 62703 (by appt. only)	217-725-2031 zioncreative.co hello@zioncreative.co	Nick VanMeter	7		○		A logo design, website development and creative services company specializing in creating	2017
13	MAM/COMM1 Services, Inc. 1427 S. Eighth St. Springfield, IL 62703	217-522-8942 mamcomm1.com mamcomm@mamcomm1.com	Michael Milburn	6			○	Design, installation and maintenance of LAN systems, including data, voice and fiber optic cabling, CATV, security systems and telephone systems. Telecommunications equipment—Allworx, Avaya, Partner.	1993
14	GoWeb1 400 South Grand Ave. West Springfield, IL 62704	217-241-8554 goweb1.com theteam@goweb1.com	Mark Roberts III	5		○		Website development, domain names, hosting, SMS text marketing - TextClubs.com, mass alerts - AlertsMadeEasy.com, copywriting, search engine optimization, SSL certificates, ongoing creative services, graphic design, consulting, DIY solutions. AI-generated send on demand greeting cards - Artoffit.com.	2008
14	KB Computer Consulting, Inc. 510 E. Apple Orchard Road, Suite 103 Springfield, IL 62703	217-529-0108 kb-consulting.net karlb@kb-consulting.net	Karl L. Backs	5	○	○	○	A full-service computer consulting and IT company specializing in managed services, offsite backup, cloud services, network security, web services, networking, hardware/software sales, MS Office 365 and consulting, among other services.	2000
14	e-websmart 830 South Grand Ave. West Springfield, IL 62712	217-553-1073 e-websmart.com info@e-websmart.com	Michelle Tjelmeland, owner Crista Gebhardt, manager	5		○		Website design and development, social media marketing and management services, graphic design.	1999
15	Hupp Information Technologies, Inc. 6401 Stonehaven Ridge Springfield, IL 62711	217-816-4877 huppinfootech.com dhupp@huppinfootech.com	Dean Hupp	4		○		A full service technology company offering custom programming for stand alone and web application along with their support.	2001
15	Motion VOIP 3309 Robbins Road Springfield, IL 62704	217-331-6670 motionvoip.com sales@motionvoip.com	Craig Lansing	4			○	Master Agent agreements with over 160+ technology partners offering fiber internet, cloud services, VOIP hosted voice, SIP trunks, business Wi-Fi solutions, security camera systems, hospitality technology management.	2002
15	Khamma Group, LLC 226 W. State St. Jacksonville, IL 62650	217-487-6888 khamma.com sroberts@khamma.com	Scott Roberts	4	○			Managed services: remote monitoring, helpdesk and patching. Remote access, virtual desktops. Virtual CIO services. Hosted Exchange and Office 365. Managed security: firewalls, anti-malware, DNS filtering, password management and vulnerability assessments. Managed hybrid cloud/local backups, disaster recovery. Network design and implementation.	2007
16	Avrom Systems 4196 Spaulding Orchard Road Springfield, IL 62711	217-899-9175 avromsystems.com info@avromsystems.com	Harv Koplo	3	○	○		Design and implementation of cloud-based video surveillance and cloud-based access control solutions, IT remote management and monitoring services, internet security UTM firewalls and IT network consulting for small businesses.	1983
16	Sangamon Connect Inc. 6000 Industrial Drive Curran, IL 62670	217-310-1010 sangamonconnect.com sales@sangamonconnect.com	Brian McLean, Chirs Oury	3	○		○	Advanced hosted VOIP services, customized to customers needs. Business voice, SMS, video, fax, call center, contact center and SIP trunks. Integrations for teams, paging systems, door phones and door entry systems. Locally owned and operated with customer service and support professionals.	2023
17	Altin Systems Springfield, IL	217-622-4856 altinsystems.com info@altinsystems.com	Peyman Esmailzadegan	1	○	○		Web design, web hosting, SEO and cloud services, software development, maintenance and support, hardware sales and support, training. Servicing industries such as government, education, retail, service, entertainment, media/press, financial and investment, legal services, health care, religious, non-profit, home office.	DND

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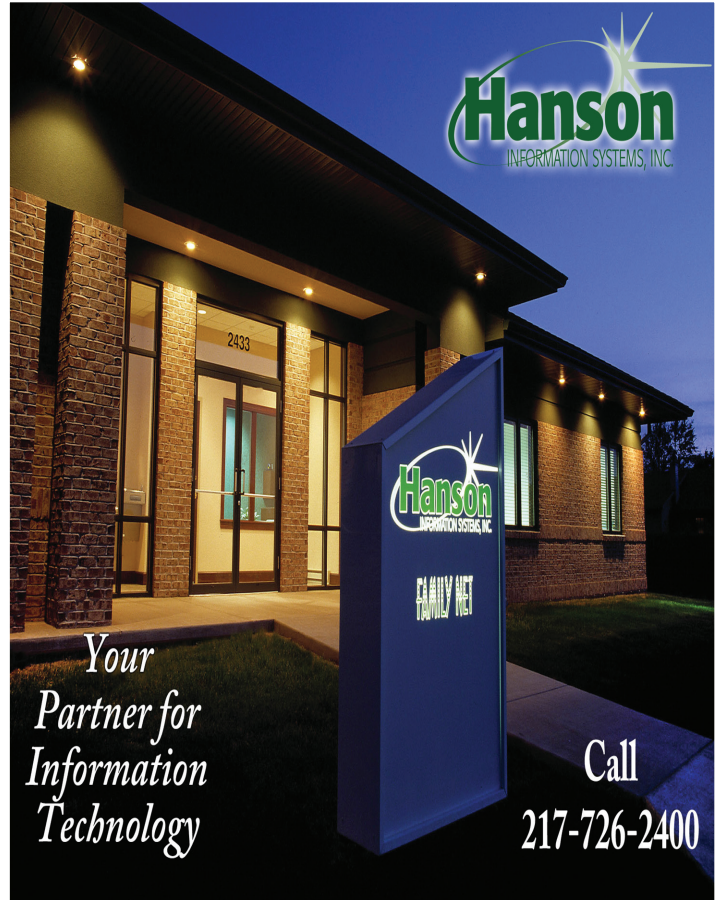
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Your website has less than a second to make a first impression

By Holly A. Whisler

Your company's website is making first impressions with potential customers 24/7. Forbes Advisor published its top website statistics for 2024 and reported that users form an opinion about a website in 0.05 seconds, and 61% leave a site if they don't find what they're looking for in about five seconds. Karen Carlson, web content and SEO strategist at Levi Ray & Shoup, a global technology services company, says a

website is a reflection of your company, and agrees that viewers formulate an impression of your company in only seconds.

To make a good first impression, Mark Roberts III, founder of GoWeb1, a full-service web development company, says a company needs to know its brand, its audience and the goal of the website, ideally, prior to building or updating a website. Once a website is available on the internet, it needs to be kept current, functional and relevant.

Pre-planning

Denny Cave, designer and developer at Cave Interactive Media, a WordPress website and web application development company in Williamsville, recommends answering some preliminary questions before writing content. Who is the intended audience, and why will they visit your company's website? What are their expectations and preferences, such as larger fonts, for example? Carlson says a company needs to know its customer's pain points and address them in the content of the website.

Roberts says businesses should focus on having a brand and branding guidelines. The logo should guide the selection of a website theme that will convey the look and feel of the organization. Ultimately, this supports the specific goal of a website, which is to market the company's products and services to the target audience.

Hiring a website development company

The next stage is to hire a website



development company to bring your vision to life. Carlson emphasizes the importance of investing in your website developer because the "website is the most valuable marketing tool — the nucleus of the marketing environment."

All marketing efforts should feed into the website, and it should be beautiful and load quickly. The content needs to be current and relevant. Cave suggests clarifying your "all-in" cost so that you're not lured in by a low initial fee.

Once a site is built, it needs to be hosted, maintained and monitored against security threats. Staff will need training on how to use the new site. These are some of the costs that could be added to the initial fee.

When evaluating website developers, Cave recommends asking the following:

- Can the developer make your website ADA compliant?
- Does the developer keep abreast of privacy laws regarding collecting customer information?
- What website performance metrics are monitored and how frequently?
- How experienced is the developer with hosting and recovering a site once it has gone down?
- Are backups conducted daily (hourly for e-commerce sites), and are backups stored on a data center separate from the website to protect from catastrophic loss?
- What are the security measures?
- Do you have the option to move your website if you're not happy with the developer's hosting?

•Can your company own your domain?
Ask about search engine optimization strategies.

Testing versions of the website

Before the first version of the website is ready to test, form a team of staff who have different roles and functions within the organization. This team will be tasked with finding its way around the website from a new user's perspective.

Roberts says that customers utilize websites as a tool to do their due diligence and grasp some understanding of what a company is about before they decide to engage in business with them. Websites should answer common product and service questions. The team should check content accuracy, select hyperlinks, applications and other forms to make sure they function as intended.

Ready to launch

Carlson says, "My biggest advice is to look at website content and make certain it is updated." Once the project is complete, promote the new website and make monitoring its performance and updating content a continuous process.

Feed all other marketing channels into the website. New features such as a blog, podcast, chatbot or drone video can be added to make the website more intriguing. The first impression of a website should be aesthetically pleasing and an overall easy experience.

Moving forward, refresh web designs every two to three years. Make a plan to meet with your web developer for updates, earmark money in the marketing budget for adding features and schedule the team to test the site as it best suits your business.

It sounds like a lot of work, but Carlson says working on your website should be a fun and rewarding experience. Businesses of all sizes should have a full website experience, one of beauty and elegance. SBJ

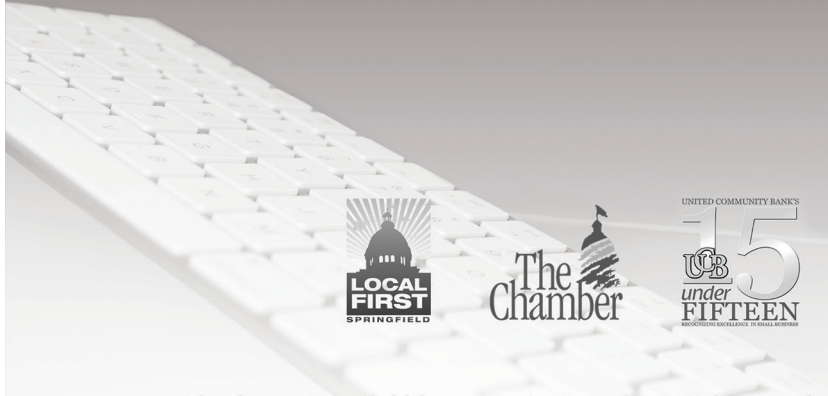


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AI and employment practices

Is artificial intelligence taking the human out of human resources?

By Annie Fulgenzi

Applicant screening, video interview analysis, resume filtering and ranking, candidate sourcing, game-based cognitive and emotional assessments and predictive analytics are just some of the artificial intelligence functions businesses are increasingly relying on for hiring and employment practices.

Roughly 83% of employers, including 99% of Fortune 500 companies, use some form of automated tools as part of their hiring process, according to an estimate given by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in early 2023. Kelly Gust, president and principal talent consultant for HR Full Circle Consulting, a management consulting firm specializing in human resources and people management, is personally familiar with AI's use in hiring and employment practices. "People have been using AI tools in HR for a long time," said Gust. "Skills-based assessments and other tests help make decision making easier. Resume searches, candidate database searches, Indeed, LinkedIn, ZipRecruite – they're all using AI. There are algorithms in the background matching job requirements and candidates and companies. Something as simple as if you've posted a job on LinkedIn and had LinkedIn suggest candidates to you – that's artificial intelligence."

One increasingly common tool is AI-driven video interviews that analyze candidates' responses, facial expressions, tone of voice and body language. The technology typically assesses communication skills and provides insights into whether the candidate is a good fit for a company's culture and role.

In 2019, Illinois lawmakers unanimously passed the Artificial Intelligence Video Interview Act, which went into effect in 2020. The first-of-its-kind law requires employers to inform candidates that AI is being used to assess their suitability, how AI works and which characteristics will be used in the evaluation. The technology typically assesses communication skills and provides insights into whether the candidate is a good fit for a company's culture and role.



However, if you are using these tools to find good culture fits, Gust cautions that a healthy dose of skepticism is warranted.

"I feel like people use culture fit as a blanket umbrella to disqualify candidates for a variety of reasons, and unfortunately, that can lead to implicit bias and adverse impact in a lot of cases," said Gust. "If you're going to use automated scoring for something as ambiguous as 'they're not a culture fit,' you better be able to define what that culture is and everybody in your organization should be able to define that very clearly and succinctly. Otherwise, what are you actually assessing? How do you know?"

Artificial intelligence is also being used to speed up the hiring process, with AI tools that scan resumes for keywords and qualifications, significantly reducing the time recruiters spend on initial screening. This allows HR professionals time to focus on the candidates that AI deems most promising, while job seekers filtered out by the technology may never have their application reviewed by a real person.

While some have touted the potential benefits of AI for mitigating bias in the recruiting process, the technology is far from perfect. Last year, the EEOC settled its first lawsuit concerning AI bias in hiring. In that case, a user who'd been screened out submitted the same application with a younger birthdate and was able to land an interview. At another company, applicants whose resumes mentioned baseball got higher marks, while resumes mentioning softball were treated negatively – demonstrating an indirect bias regarding gender.

A recent legislative development currently awaiting the governor's signature, Illinois

HB3773, emphasizes the responsible use of AI in hiring. The bill aims to ensure that AI tools used in employment do not discriminate against protected characteristics. According to a press release from the bill's sponsor, state Sen. Javier Cervantes, D-Chicago, "any employer who uses artificial intelligence in a prohibited manner or fails to notify an employee of the employer's use of artificial intelligence would be in violation of the Illinois Human Rights Act."

Concerns around AI bias are exactly why Gust says it's imperative that employers be skeptical of these tools: "If I'm hiring a custodian, how much does that custodian need to demonstrate oral and written communication skills and use all of the words that are in my mission statement and be a culture fit? Maybe they do, maybe they don't," Gust said. "Sometimes we look for things that are not actually related to the job we're asking the person to do. That can be a problem."

Gust noted that it's important to look at uniform guidelines for employee selection and the statistical rigor that an assessment tool should be able to demonstrate to show that it actually predicts what it says it's going to predict, like job performance or culture fit.

"You need to show any AI tool does what it says it's going to do, measures what it purports to measure, and that it is free from biased discrimination and adverse impact," Gust said.

According to Gust, this requires some due diligence: "Do your research. Ask to see the technical report. Ask to bring in someone who knows to ask the right questions: Does this tool actually predict job performance? In my organization, in this job, is the tool reliable, fair and unbiased? How does this tool fit in my process?" **SBJ**

Annie Fulgenzi is a second-year law student at University of Illinois who is particularly interested in issues related to artificial intelligence. She previously interned at Springfield Business Journal and Illinois Times while completing her undergraduate degree at SIUE.



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SECURITY

Sources: The companies.
Ranked by number of local employees.

	NAME/ADDRESS	PHONE/WEBSITE/EMAIL	OWNER/MANAGER	NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES	VIDEO	FIRE	SECURITY	ACCESS CONTROL	WIRELESS	REMOTE	SERVICES OFFERED	YEAR EST'D
1	CDS Office Technologies 612 S. Dirksen Parkway Springfield, IL 62703	800-367-1508 cdsot.com jditto@cdsot.com	Jay Watson Mark Watson	130	○		○	○	○	○	Security cameras, wireless networking, remote access solutions and cybersecurity.	1971
2	Senergy Electric 509 N. Elm St. Williamsville, IL 62693	217-566-2826 senergy-electric.com	Matthew J. Giacomini, president Brandon M. Keafer, PE, vice president	52	○		○	○	○		Design-build and design-assist security and technology solutions including CCTV, access control, intrusion detection, fire, paging, intercom, audio/visual and IT infrastructure. Offer managed services on all solutions.	2014
3	George Alarm 917 S. Ninth St. Springfield, IL 62703	217-525-1334 georgealarm.com sales@georgealarm.com	Doug George	50	○	○	○	○	○	○	Burglar, fire and video systems, door access control, fire testing and sensitivity testing, patient monitoring systems and phone apps systems. NICET certified staff, UL-certified central station. U.S. manufactured products.	1957
4	Young's Security Systems, Inc. 440 N. First St. Springfield, IL 62702	217-744-9000 youngs-security.com jhvey@youngs-security.com bhvey@youngs-security.com	Jim Havey Bill Havey	35	○	○	○	○	○	○	Local UL-listed central station monitoring over cellular, internet and phone. Professional design and installation of state-of-the-art commercial and residential security, fire, cameras, door access control, entry door security and medical alert systems. Wired, wireless and hybrid systems. Systems installed by trained technicians in a professional manner. All systems are phone app compatible.	1985
5	Central Illinois Security A Levi, Ray & Shoup, Inc. Company 2451 W. Monroe St. Springfield, IL 62704	217-787-4970 centralillinoissecurity.com swilson@centralillinoissecurity.com	Dick Levi, chairman Sharon Wilson, general manager	30	○	○	○	○	○	○	Global information technology solutions including the design and installation of security systems, fire alarms, video surveillance, smart home automation, access control systems and video conferencing technologies for both residential and commercial applications. State-of-the-art, UL-approved central monitoring facility provides alarm monitoring throughout the central Illinois area.	1979
6	A-1 Corporate Hardware 101 N. Fourth St. Springfield, IL 62702	217-744-7575 a-1lock.com info@a-1lock.com	Joseph White	23	○			○	○	○	Locksmith services and door hardware for residential, commercial and government agencies. IP surveillance for commercial and government agencies. Radio-dispatched technicians available.	1945
7	AmeriCall Communications 477 N. Walnut St. Springfield, IL 62702	217-522-2255 americallinc.com pfelton@americallinc.com	Gene Dinardo Melanie McDaniel Joe Ushman	15	○	○	○	○	○		Commercial security services including security cameras for parking lots and building exteriors, interior offices. Customized secure access controls and monitoring for every type of facility including retrofitting security platforms into existing environments.	2003
8	SEA Group, Inc. 3901 Pintail Drive, Suite A Springfield, IL 62711	217-523-1717 Seagr.com info@seagr.com	Joe Marchizza	10	○		○	○	○		IP video security solutions/door access control, nurse call solutions, sound masking/paging systems, structured cabling/network backbone/copper and fiber optics, all low-voltage solutions and IT consulting.	1984
8	Barcom Security 386 S. Koke Mill Road Springfield IL 62711	800-642-5413 barcomsecurity.com mtrader@barcomsecurity.com	Matt Trader, vice president	10	○	○	○	○	○	○	A family-owned and operated full-service security technology organization providing residential, small business, commercial and enterprise-level services. Barcom is one of a select few designated with a local 5 Diamond UL listed central station for all alarm/video monitoring needs. Professional fire and security engineers on staff and available. Fire alarms, intrusion alarms, video surveillance, access control, intercom systems, structured cabling, nurse call and Wonder Guard solutions and many cloud solutions.	1976
9	Heart Technologies 301 E. Laurel Springfield, IL 62703	217-544-3100 heart.net sfeipel@heart.net	Sheila Feipel	9	○	○	○	○	○	○	Fire and intrusion security, design, installation and testing, NICET certified, door access control and video cameras, paging, intercom and voice evacuation.	1987
10	Lloyd IT Services, LLC 319 S. Madison St., Suite 2B Springfield, IL 62702	217-718-3838 lloyditservices.com klloyd@lloyditservices.com	Kevin Lloyd	1	○					○	Locally owned IT services company providing 24/7/365 support to commercial, government and residential clients. Services include security camera systems, server/computer sales and repair, network cabling, network security, Wi-Fi, VoIP, managed services and more.	2015

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City council moves Frito-Lay project forward, despite objections from neighbors

By Dean Olsen

Almost two dozen neighbors of what is expected to be a large Frito-Lay distribution center along Interstate 55 near the Chatham exit left a Springfield City Council meeting frustrated July 16.

The council voted 6-3 in favor of zoning variances allowing the project to move forward.

Voting in favor were Aids. Chuck Redpath of Ward 1, Lakeisha Purchase of Ward 5, Brad Carlson of Ward 7, Erin Conley of Ward 8, Jim Donelan of Ward 9 and Ralph Hanauer of Ward 10.

Voting against were Aids. Roy Williams of Ward 3, Larry Rockford of Ward 4, and Jennifer Notariano of Ward 6. Ward 2 Aid. Shawn Gregory was absent from the vote.

Representatives of Lakeview Acres LLC, the company that would develop the land and lease the proposed 226,800-square-foot facility to the end user, said the soonest construction could begin would be spring 2025.

Lakeview officials and Frito-Lay representatives have declined to say whether Frito-Lay would be the end user, but Illinois Times has confirmed the snack food company's involvement in a site that would cost between \$30 million and \$51 million to build, based on industry estimates.

The council's decision on zoning didn't require disclosure of an end user.

Taylor Bass, a manager from Becknell Industrial, which is assisting the developer of the site – currently a farm field – said Lakeview will work with the Illinois Department of Transportation to determine whether and where additional traffic signals and turning lanes need to be installed along Palm Road and at Lakewood Drive to help regulate traffic flow.

Lakeview would pay for any road improvements or signals, Bass said.

Neighbors who turned out, clapping loudly and yelling to express their opposition to the project, said the project

would bring unwanted noise, dust, traffic congestion and potential danger to school buses transporting Ball-Chatham School District students.

"It's going to be an eyesore," Melissa Smith told council members. "This is the entrance to Springfield. This is very alarming."

Council members who supported the project, which would be in Ward 1, indicated they supported it because the

zoning approval are up to developers and can be influenced by whether landowners are willing to sell.

Variances were needed because of several factors, including the size of the fence – higher than normally allowed – and to allow the building height to exceed the maximum 35 feet currently allowed.

Sources told *Illinois Times* that 150 to 200 permanent full-time workers would be employed at the site. Bass told the council that 150 to 200 temporary construction jobs would be created.

He said an earthen berm to be constructed on the west side of the site and adjacent to four-lane Palm Road would largely obscure the site from the view of residents living west of Palm and reduce noise reaching the neighbors.

But Brad Metzger, another neighbor, said the site would "distract from the aesthetic appeal of our neighborhoods."

Neighbor Fred O'Connor said the project would cause home values to plummet.

"They could go to another area," O'Connor said. "You don't build on an exchange. You want to build near an exchange."

He asked council members: "Would you want this in your neighborhood? I don't think you would."

Bass said the site is an ideal location for a large distribution center. He estimated that up to 50 or 60 tractor-trailer trucks would be transporting goods to and from the site each day once fully operational.

Smith said the site is not within Sangamon Mass Transit District boundaries, so city buses wouldn't transport people to and from the site. But

Hanauer said, however, that Sangamon/Menard Area Rural Transit, which operates vans to transport people to rural parts of Sangamon County, would be available to serve workers at the site who schedule rides ahead of time. **SBJ**



Melissa Smith, a neighbor of a planned distribution center along Palm Road in Springfield, tells the City Council that the project would be an eyesore and would create traffic, dust and noise problems in the area. PHOTO BY DEAN OLSEN.

approximately 30-acre site already is in an industrial zone and the project would potentially create hundreds of good-paying jobs for people who don't need college degrees to be hired.

Rockford said he is in favor of bringing new jobs to Springfield but sympathized with the neighbors' concerns and wished there would have been "more discussion" before a final vote.

Williams said he would have preferred that the distribution center be located closer to his ward on the east and north sides of the city to make jobs at the center more accessible to his constituents.

Ryan McCrady, president and chief executive officer of the Springfield Sangamon Growth Alliance, said information about potential sites throughout Springfield were shared with the developer. But he said final decisions on purchasing land and proceeding with

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Widening the pathways to work: Reaching untapped pools of talent

By Kelly Gust

Did you know that 25% of the working-age population in the U.S. has some sort of disability? Or that 28% of adults in the U.S. have been impacted by the justice system with an arrest or criminal record? Did you know that almost 10% of Americans are connected to the military as active duty, veterans or as caregivers and family members?

These statistics are from the Society for Human Resource Management, a leading professional association for human resource experts and business leaders. With so many employers still competing for top talent, you can't afford to overlook valuable groups of capable workers such as individuals with disabilities, veterans, people with a justice system history, non-student youth and even workers older than age 60.

Individuals who have traditionally faced barriers to employment often have a strong commitment to their organizations, high degrees of loyalty and engagement and bring unique perspectives. Providing someone with an opportunity that they previously thought was unattainable often results in an employee who is eager to demonstrate their value to the organization.

If your organization could benefit from engaging members from new communities, below is an overview of a few different populations and information to consider to better connect with these broader audiences.

Individuals with disabilities: More than 15 million people in the U.S. qualify as having some sort of physical disability according to a study by Accenture, yet only about 20% of working-age Americans with disabilities are employed. Individuals with disabilities can bring tenacity, creativity, adaptability and resourcefulness to the workplace, and will likely contribute to making



your products and services more accessible to others. Organizations will benefit by training hiring managers on accommodations – the vast majority of which are low-cost or no-cost – and creating hiring and onboarding processes that are accessible and open-minded. Check out employingabilities.org for more information.

Individuals with criminal records: According to SHRM, more than 80 million people in the U.S. have a criminal record of some sort, the vast majority having only a single conviction. Having a record can be a huge obstacle to achieving meaningful employment, but if employers are simply screening out all individuals with a record, you're not only missing out on potential hires who will be committed, loyal and eager to prove their value, you might also be breaking the law.

Employers cannot ask applicants about an arrest record and can only inquire about an individual's criminal history in the later stages of the hiring process. In 2021, Illinois enacted the Employee Background Fairness Act, which requires that employers consider the length of time before a conviction, the number of convictions, the nature and severity, age at the time of conviction and evidence of rehabilitation before deciding not to hire a candidate based on background check results, along with other requirements. Before rejecting a candidate strictly because of a flag on a background check, take the time to get to know the person and hear their story. You

could be capturing a great potential employee who is ready to make a difference.

Military community: Active military and their spouses, as well as veterans, face a number of barriers to employment such as relocation, the need for time away from work to support their service and access to benefits, including mental-health support. However, the military community also brings

strong organizational skills, accountability and the ability to work under pressure. Hiring veterans or their spouses is a great way to thank them for their service and benefit from the knowledge and experience that comes from being in the military. Employers can participate in Work Opportunity Tax Credits, Veterans Readiness and Employment programs and other Special Employer Incentive Programs which provide reimbursements and cost offsets for hiring from within the military community. For more information go to militarycommunityatwork.org.

In addition to the populations described above, SHRM also has resources for connecting with individuals aged 60 or older and non-student youth. Resources include education and outreach support, certificate programs and more. The Central Illinois Chapter of the Society for Human Resource Management is the local affiliate and can help direct employers to resources for widening pathways to work for local employers. Connect with CIC SHRM at cicshrm.wildapricot.org.

Start by stating in your job postings that you're an equal opportunity employer interested in connecting with individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, then take steps to build deeper connections with candidates who could help your organization thrive. **SBJ**



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Kevin England to step down as Memorial Health president

Kevin England, who assumed the title of Memorial Health president July 1, is stepping down from the role due to “an unexpected and recent health issue,” according to a statement from a Memorial spokesperson.

“Ed Curtis will continue as Memorial Health president and CEO until a successor is named. Kevin will return to his prior role as Memorial Health’s senior vice president and chief administrative officer. He appreciates the well wishes he has received and the respect for his privacy,” Angie Muhs, manager of strategic communications, said in a written response to an SBJ inquiry.

England has served in a variety of roles in his 35 years with Memorial Health. He began

his leadership career as director of clinical resource management at Springfield Memorial Hospital and went on to oversee a wide range of clinical areas as well as business development functions.

He graduated from University of Illinois at Springfield with a bachelor of arts degree in management and from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with a master’s degree in business administration, earning both degrees with honors. He is a member of the board of trustees for the Springfield YMCA and served on the board of directors of the Central Illinois Community Blood Center (now ImpactLife) for 14 years, with 12 of those years as board chair.



Kevin England is stepping down as Memorial Health president. PHOTO COURTESY MEMORIAL HEALTH

SIU School of Medicine names new associate dean for graduate medical education

Hospital Sisters Health System (HSHS) has announced that Chad Markham, MBA, president and CEO of HSHS St. Anthony’s Memorial Hospital and HSHS Good Shepherd Hospital, has been promoted to HSHS Central Illinois Market Chief Operating Officer.

In this role, Markham is responsible for operations at HSHS ministries in the central Illinois Market, which includes St. John’s Hospital in Springfield, St. Anthony’s Memorial Hospital in Effingham, Good Shepherd Hospital in Shelbyville, St. Mary’s Hospital in Decatur and St. Francis Hospital in Litchfield.

Markham joined HSHS as a ministry CEO in September 2021 and has served in health care executive leadership roles since 2005. Most recently, he spent 12 years at Unity Point Health’s St. Luke’s Hospital in Sioux City, Iowa, where he was senior vice president for clinics and network development and then chief operating officer.

With Markham moving into a market leadership role, Danny Hardman, RN, BSN, MBA, will serve as interim chief administrative officer at St. Anthony’s Memorial Hospital and Good Shepherd Hospital.



Chad Markham has been named HSHS Central Illinois Market Chief Operating Officer. PHOTO COURTESY HSHS

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AI and the law

By Thomas C. Pavlik Jr.

Artificial intelligence has rapidly transformed various sectors, from health care and finance to transportation and entertainment. As AI technologies become increasingly sophisticated and pervasive, they present unique challenges and opportunities for the legal field.

Most people probably don't realize it, but the state of Illinois has taken a leading role in establishing artificial intelligence policies. For example, way back in 2008, the Biometric Information Privacy Act was enacted. Perhaps you remember it being at issue in a class action suit against Facebook for its use of facial recognition software.

Biometric data involves the measurement of a person's unique characteristics such as fingerprints, palmprints, voiceprints or facial, retinal or iris measurements. These markers are then used as unique identifiers and cannot be changed, unlike things like social security numbers. The Biometric Information Privacy Act limits how entities can collect this information and was ahead of its time in anticipating the challenges of AI.

Already, litigants are using BIPA to challenge certain uses of AI. For example, a lawsuit was recently filed claiming that OpenAI and Microsoft violated BIPA by illegally collecting facial markers and using that data to train its generative AI image creator. Other suits have been filed under BIPA challenging employers' use of voice-recognition technology in violation of this Illinois law. Both cases resulted in large class action settlements.

Moreover, the Illinois Supreme Court recently ruled that BIPA claims accrue each time there is a violation of the statute. In that case, White Castle was accused of violating BIPA each time an employee clocked in with a fingerprint scanner without the BIPA protections. Given that BIPA provides for \$1,000 in damages for each violation, the use of AI in violation of BIPA could result in judgments in the billions of dollars. Oh – and the court also held that claims can go back as far as five years.

The Illinois Supreme Court also decided

to weigh in on technology and attorney ethics. In 2016 it adopted the ethical duty of technology competence, becoming the 15th state to do so. The rule now states that every attorney has a duty to “maintain the requisite knowledge and skill, a lawyer should keep abreast of changes in the law and its practice, including the benefits and risks associated with relevant technology, engage in continuing study and education and comply with all continuing legal education requirements to which the lawyer is subject.”

Illinois has recently been active in establishing other AI limits. In 2023, AI and the ever-evolving cyber-landscape drove Illinois to enact two laws addressing sexual

passed in response to employers' increasing use of AI to monitor applicants' facial expressions, word choices, body language, etc. to find the best candidates, as well as their use of AI to evaluate resumes, social media presence and test results. Under this law, employers must: (a) inform candidates that AI technology will be used to evaluate interviews, (b) provide them with a written explanation of the process, including traits to be analyzed and the algorithms and characteristics that will be used, and (c) obtain the candidate's prior consent to the use of AI.

Another law was enacted in 2023 that established the Generative AI and Natural

Language Processing Task Force. Among other things, this group is charged with the development of best AI practices with respect to (a) the protection of consumer information, (b) the use of AI in schools, for public services and in the workplace, (c) protecting civil liberties and (d) cybersecurity. The Department of Innovation and Technology is leading the effort, which will include five public meetings before a report

must come out before the end of this year. As AI technologies continue to advance, they will undoubtedly bring about further legal and ethical challenges. Policymakers, legal professionals and technologists must work together to navigate this complex landscape, ensuring that AI is developed and deployed in ways that are fair, transparent and accountable.

The interplay between AI and the law presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities in which Illinois has been at the forefront. Effective regulatory frameworks, ethical considerations and innovative legal practices are crucial in ensuring that AI technologies are used responsibly and beneficially. As we move forward, it is imperative that we strike a balance between fostering innovation and protecting the rights and interests of individuals and society as a whole. **SBJ**



deepfakes. The first law established a cause of action for individuals who have been the victim of non-consensual deepfake dissemination. A second law was passed that added AI deepfakes to the Illinois Nonconsensual Dissemination of Private Sexual Images Act. It's now been made clear that it applies to generative AI media as well as digital alterations.

Two bills that were passed by the House and Senate were sent to the governor in June. The first strengthens the protections Illinois law provides creators from having their likeness or voices generated by AI and then disseminated without their permission. Once signed, Illinois will be the second state to beef up its laws in this regard. The second bill clarifies that AI-generated child pornography is illegal.

Illinois was again at the forefront in 2020 as the first state to enact a law addressing the use of AI in the hiring process. The Artificial Intelligence Video Interview Act was



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Computer Banc serves our community and beyond

By Janet Seitz

Since 1999, Springfield's Computer Banc has served as a depository for donated computers which are refurbished and distributed to nonprofits, schools and the underserved at a reduced cost. The organization is also an authorized nonprofit Microsoft refurbisher, meaning it is officially licensed to repurpose computers with up-to-date Windows software and is the largest nonprofit Microsoft-registered refurbisher in Illinois.

In addition to donating computers to Computer Banc, monetary donations help offset fees to provide computers to children or other populations in need. While Computer Banc's programs primarily serve Illinois, it does have a national program for active-duty military, veterans and a special program for disabled veterans.

According to David Fowler, Computer Banc's executive director, the organization is still on the site of the former Sangamo Electric facility (built 1925-1928), but it's changing.

"We have finally come to an end regarding the railroad relocation project and the impact on our facility," Fowler said. "The agreement was signed earlier this year and the demolition phase is almost complete. Our two buildings on the west side of the property represented a loss of 11,600 square feet of storage."

Fowler said the remaining two buildings, totaling about 24,400 square feet, are being redesigned for maximum efficiency. Included in the renovation is a 1,200-square-foot-office, a redesigned computer lab of the same size, an 800-square-foot climate-controlled storage room, a 3,000-square-foot volunteer center for electronics and parts sorting and a 10,000-square-foot warehouse with pallet-racking storage.

Computer Banc is a hybrid-staffed organization. The nonprofit employs just five paid, full-time staff (one administrator and four technical), plus additional part-time staff and, on average, six to 10 volunteers daily to further the mission.

It not only collects donated computers for e-recycling, but it also has added a technician training component to its mission.

"Over the last 10 years," explained Fowler,



Bob Pietras, the board president and an 18-year volunteer, unloads a rack of eight servers that are used to wipe hard drives to industry standards.

PHOTO COURTESY COMPUTER BANC

"we have had over 118 people complete our 60-hour training course. We also coordinate our training efforts with other community agencies and schools to provide a six-to-nine-month technician internship. You often hear someone say, 'It takes a community,' and we at Computer Banc would agree," he said.

Unlike some organizations, Computer Banc continued to collect donations during the pandemic and provide computers almost uninterrupted, said Fowler. "During the first six months of the pandemic lockdown, we worked six days a week to meet the demand from our customers. Many nonprofits were not prepared to work from home. And of course, many individuals and families didn't have home computers," he said.

Fowler said computer donations have always been cyclical but have remained generally strong, and he expects an increase. "We are entering a period of significant change regarding computers. Thousands of computers will become increasingly obsolete over the next year as Microsoft enforces the change from Windows 10 to Windows 11. Windows 11 will not operate on com-

puters that are older than four-to-six years, essentially a similar position taken by Apple for many years," Fowler said.


Computer Banc assists a number of educational, health and social support organizations. Among those are the YMCA of Springfield, which has had a partnership with Computer Banc for more than a decade.

Francisco Saravia, Springfield YMCA's chief technology officer, said the YMCA has benefited in several ways.

"Computer Banc's refurbished computers and hardware have allowed the YMCA to significantly reduce its technology expenses, freeing resources to invest in other areas, like programs and community services. The reliable and up-to-date technology provided by Computer Banc has enhanced staff productivity and streamlined operations," Saravia said. He noted that utilizing refurbished technology also has allowed the YMCA to reduce its environmental footprint.

"The reliable technology has improved communication, data management and program delivery," Saravia continued. "The YMCA and Computer Banc share a common goal of empowering individuals and strengthening communities. We anticipate that their support will continue to be instrumental in helping us fulfill our mission. As our organization evolves, we are confident that Computer Banc will continue to be a valuable partner in ensuring that we have the technology resources necessary to thrive."

Community members can support Computer Banc in various ways. In addition to computer donations, every Friday Computer Banc mobilizes teams of volunteers and welcomes new members. It also has a variety of open positions for internships and other on-the-job training programs through various community partnerships.

For more information on Computer Banc's programs and efforts, visit computer-banc.org. 

Janet Seitz is a local communications professional, writer and artist. To share your story, contact her at janetseitz1@gmail.com.



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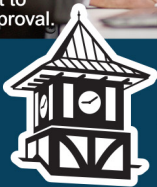
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WOMEN'S EVENT CALENDAR

Join Women Entrepreneurs of Central Illinois from 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m. on Wednesday, Aug. 14, at Illinois Educators Credit Union for a conversation about entrepreneurship with Kisha Woods with Upgraded MindsetZ. Upgraded MindsetZ has been a driving force in fostering personal growth and development since 2020 and remains committed to empowering women in unleashing their full potential, both personally and professionally.

Advance registration is required. The cost is \$20 for members or guests registered by a member, or \$28 for non-members. Visit wecspringfield.org/events for more information or to sign up.

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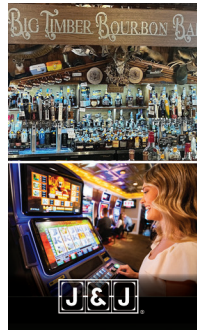
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Delaney's Smokehouse

By Thomas C. Pavlik, Jr.

Smokehouse burger and Fries
PHOTOS COURTESY DELANEY'S SMOKEHOUSE FACEBOOK

Delaney's Smokehouse is the latest iteration of this long-time, north-end stalwart. This latest incarnation has managed to provide diners with the classics that have been forever associated with the location, such as the fried chicken, as well as new and fun offerings.

If you've never been to Delaney's, you might think you are in the wrong location as it's located in a primarily residential area. This makes sense, as it also doubles as the area's neighborhood bar.

There's not much to the space, but we did note that the new owners put quite a bit of work into improving the place. The floors appeared new as did the roof, and we noted that the HVAC system was a vast improvement from before. Customers enter into the bar area, which has a few high-top tables, and can then proceed into the back space that has a handful of low-tops. The former video gaming area was blocked off, and we forgot to ask what they intended to do with that space.

We did speak to the owner, who kindly answered all of our questions. We learned that Delaney's plans on serving chili made with the owner's own recipe honed from years of competition cooking, and that the fried chicken coating is his own custom recipe as well. When we visited, Delaney's had only been serving food for about three weeks, and the owner told us that more offerings would be rolling out over the coming weeks.

We arrived at 11:30 a.m. and were the first customers of the day. By the time we left, most of the tables were taken and the kitchen was in full swing. Service was friendly and attentive.

The menu contains most of the staples you would expect from a tavern such as burgers, horseshoes and pork tenderloin sandwiches. Some of those are made with house-smoked pork, sausage or beef brisket. There's even a smoked chicken salad sandwich.

We decided to start with an order of smoked chicken wings, especially because dark meat holds up well to a long, slow smoke. These were the whole wing – both the drumette and the wingette, so it was a large portion for \$9. They were juicy (we wondered if they had been brined), and definitely smoked, yet the smoke was not overpowering. It was an auspicious start to our lunch.

There were also two daily specials, one of which involved a 1/3 pound burger topped with house smoked pulled pork and coleslaw. My guest and I were tempted but passed, something we noted with regret when we saw it come out to an adjacent table.

I decided to go with the brisket melt plate (\$13.75). It was hardwood-smoked, sliced beef brisket covered with melted cheese and sand-



Pulled pork

Fish and chips

wiched between two pieces of Texas toast. The brisket was the star of the show; it was juicy, tender and had a nice bark. The seasoning seemed like just salt and pepper, which I believe is the only way to make it. The bread was perfectly prepared in a skillet with butter so that it was crispy and crunchy on the outside with some softness still on the inside. The fries were the one weak spot of the dish. They could have used some more time in the fryer.

The server brought out two barbecue sauces, a Memphis-style and a Carolina-style. The Carolina-style was not tomato-based but rather vinegar-based and slightly thinner than a Midwest sauce. It was delicious, with the sweet and savory notes tickling the tongue. The Memphis-style was equally as good but was made with a tomato base with a nice, sweet finish. I ate half of the sandwich utilizing the two sauces and the other half dry. Either way, the dish was a winner, and each sauce complimented rather than overwhelmed the brisket.

My guest decided to go with the four-piece all dark meat fried chicken (\$14). He is a seasoned fried chicken pro, and for him to give praise you know that it was legitimately good stuff. He found it nice and crispy and advised that the balance of flavors in the breading was just about as perfect as you could hope for. The meat was juicy, tender and packed with



flavor. He ordered cornbread and green beans as his sides and was pleased with both, noting that the green beans were not out of a can and had just a hint of sweetness to them.

All and all we are glad to see Delaney's open again, and we plan to return.

Address: 2249 N. Third St., Springfield
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 Website: delaneyssmokehouse.com
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