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Q&A with Mark Watson, CDS

Local small businesses put AI to work

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Ready or not

It is hard to interest the general public in the banalities of municipal zoning code unless there is a crisis at hand, at which point it is often too late to do much about it. And when a governing body manages to find funding for a master plan for a particular area – which inevitably includes a public engagement component – there are generally more people decrying “another plan that sits on a shelf” than showing up at the feedback sessions, thereby creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is said that if you don’t have a plan, you are part of someone else’s, and that certainly applies to local governments as well as individuals. Rural townships that have never had to grapple with commercial zoning issues are increasingly finding themselves caught between data center developers promising millions of dollars in new annual revenue and angry residents who want to preserve the agricultural land in their communities.

Not surprisingly, the developers typically seek the path of least resistance. The Logan County Board issued a 12-month moratorium on data centers in May, which was later overturned by a judge, but in the meantime the developer approached the Village of Latham with a proposal to annex the property in question, thereby bypassing the need for approval from the County Board. A community of 350 people could be faced with overseeing parameters for a \$5 billion project.

Even in Sangamon County, a much more urban area with professional zoning staff, debate continues over whether the two-page ordinance passed to provide zoning guidance for data centers is sufficient. The simple regulations – more than 10 times shorter than those governing solar and wind projects – were passed without fanfare in July 2025, prior to the news that CyrusOne was planning to build a data center in the county. Opponents later pointed out that CyrusOne was already communicating with county officials before county committees began discussing zoning guidelines for data centers.

Morgan County is trying to get ahead of the topic, with several groups pushing for a voter referendum to place restrictions on future data center developments, although county official said they have not been approached about a specific project.

Regardless of the outcome of the specific data center projects proposed for Sangamon, Logan and Christian counties, this will almost certainly be an ongoing topic for years to come. It’s a good reminder of the need for both individuals and municipalities to be proactive and have a vision for future development, before they find someone else’s vision being foisted upon them.



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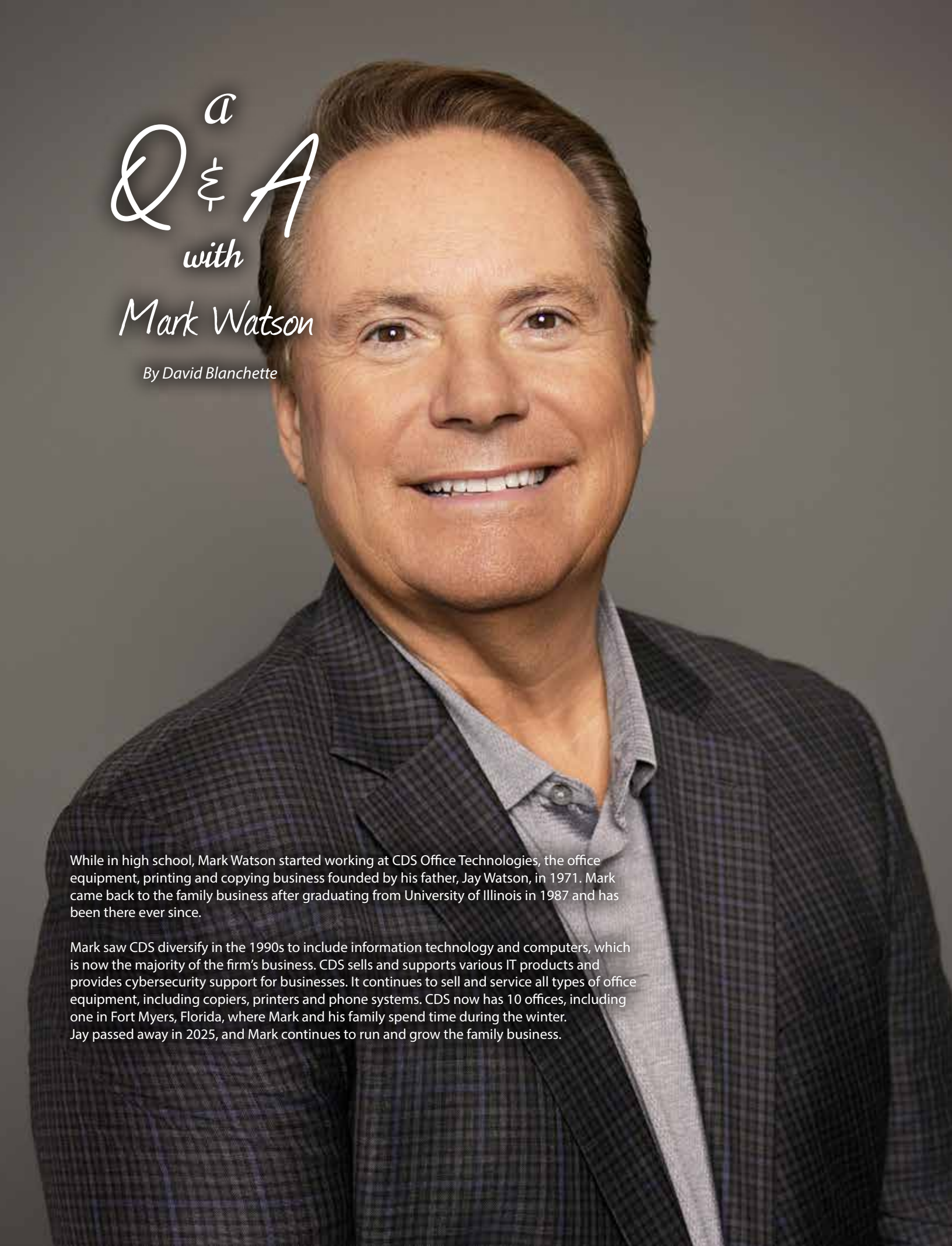
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A portrait of Mark Watson, a middle-aged man with short brown hair, smiling. He is wearing a dark blue and black checkered blazer over a light blue button-down shirt. The background is a solid grey.

a Q & A *with* *Mark Watson*

By David Blanchette

While in high school, Mark Watson started working at CDS Office Technologies, the office equipment, printing and copying business founded by his father, Jay Watson, in 1971. Mark came back to the family business after graduating from University of Illinois in 1987 and has been there ever since.

Mark saw CDS diversify in the 1990s to include information technology and computers, which is now the majority of the firm's business. CDS sells and supports various IT products and provides cybersecurity support for businesses. It continues to sell and service all types of office equipment, including copiers, printers and phone systems. CDS now has 10 offices, including one in Fort Myers, Florida, where Mark and his family spend time during the winter. Jay passed away in 2025, and Mark continues to run and grow the family business.

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

I was born and raised in Springfield. My first job was at CDS at 16 years of age. While I was at the University of Illinois, I worked summers for my dad at CDS. When I graduated college in 1987, I was a sales rep – did that for a few years, then became sales manager. I eventually took over all of the branch offices. Ten years ago, I really started taking over everything and purchased the business from my dad about three years ago.

Did you always picture yourself being involved in the family business?

I believe so. My father was involved until he passed away, and I think I'll always be involved in some capacity. We have two boys, and they work in the business. One of them, in particular, is being groomed to take my spot.

My dad was the founder of our company, and he's the one who really had to endure the hardship for the small business in those early years. When I came into the business it was a totally different situation than when it was founded in 1971. I was 6 years old then.

My dad was a really good guy who wanted to learn and was not afraid to take some risks.

What challenges did CDS face when diversifying into IT and computers?

The world was changing at that point, and we were evolving as it changed. For example, around 1980 we started selling electronic typewriters like the IBM Selectric – the typewriter with the rotating ball on it. Then typewriters came along that had memory, and we became the No. 1 seller of one such product through the 1980s.

That evolved into screen-based word processing at the end of the 1980s, and that's when the PC came along. So, in an effort to stay in the word processing business, we started selling computers and software. That led to networking around 1995, and shortly after that, Microsoft came out with Windows. That's kind of where we sit today.

The challenge was transforming from the typewriter world



From left to right: Son Tyler Watson, father Jay Watson, Mark Watson, son Reed Watson and brother Kory Watson at a University of Illinois football game in 2018. PHOTO COURTESY MARK WATSON

into the PC world. Luckily, our copier business was strong and thriving; it allowed us to make decisions and learn as we went along without the jeopardy of going out of business.

What is the new wave that businesses like yours need to ride to stay successful?

The thing that's creating the most fear in the business world is the potential to be ransomed or hacked. The cybersecurity element continues to be a big part of everything we do because businesses have a legitimate reason to be fearful of what's going on. The global ransom and hacking epidemic is like organized crime. That element continues to create a lot of interest, and that's where our company can step in and assist businesses with those potential problems. We can put them in a scenario where, hopefully, they're not going to have that problem occur.



The family at a birthday celebration for Mark's wife, Diane, at center.

PHOTO COURTESY MARK WATSON

What challenges and opportunities does AI present for modern business owners?

You could take 10 different business owners in the industry and get 10 different answers to that question. It's certainly a tool that's in play, and we are being asked by our customers how they can utilize it. We utilize AI in both our sales and service entities at CDS. AI is here to stay, and we all just have to figure out how best to use it. It's not a cure-all. It's not perfect. It makes mistakes, and people need to make sure that what they are getting from AI is accurate. We still need a human component to manage AI.

Will we ever reach a point where there is too much technology in the workplace?

It seems like, in our world, we always find ways to overdo everything. Hopefully, that will not be the case, but it's certainly possible.

How important is community involvement for a business like CDS?

Our customers live in the communities that we support, and we live and have offices in those same communities. It's nice to give back because it impacts and helps people in those communities.

What advice would you give to young people who are entering the workforce?

They need to stay in their lane and learn more about what they are doing. Your value only increases with experience. The more you learn, the more experience you gain, the more value you have for your business or employer. So, try to gain as much experience as you can because your worth will continue to go up if you do.

What may people be surprised to learn about you?

I'm a fiercely competitive person, but that's the game we play in our business. It's a very competitive landscape, and you either compete or you lose. It's easier to handle things when you win, but there's a lot to be learned when you lose and make improvements because of that.

FORTY UNDER 40 2026

The 2026 class of Forty Under 40 was recognized at an event held July 16 at the Student Union at University of Illinois Springfield. Steve Thomas served as the keynote speaker.

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.

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Local small businesses put AI to work

By Lynn Whalen

Brittney Robinson and Caitlin Becker are using artificial intelligence to build an app for Bloom Wine Bar and Florals, streamlining what had been a manual task for their small business.

Robinson said their vision was to create an app where members can log in, see their current perks, redeem benefits, track visits and stay updated on upcoming events. Currently, many of these processes are handled manually.

"So we're excited to improve the member experience while reducing administrative work behind the scenes," said Robinson, who co-owns Bloom Wine Bar in downtown Springfield along with Becker.

Bloom Wine Bar is one of several local businesses who completed a recent six-week workshop sponsored by Innovate Springfield focused on helping small businesses expand their AI use.

"Our main takeaway from the class is knowing what tools are out there for us to use, how to spot AI-generated marketing and knowing when to use these tools and when not to," Becker said. "We do not want to replace anything that we currently do except to troubleshoot hang-ups that we spend too much time on that could be solved with some information and processes."

Working efficiently is vital for Robinson and Becker as the two are involved in every aspect of the business – from inventory, staffing and food preparation to floral design, event planning and customer service. They're also expanding into the two upper floors of their historic downtown building on the Old Capitol Plaza to create additional event spaces, including adding a new commercial kitchen.

Robinson said her biggest insight gained from the workshop was realizing how many AI tools are available to solve different types of problems.

"Rather than trying to use one tool for everything, we learned how to identify specific pain points in our business and match them with the right technology," she said.



Caitlin Becker and Brittney Robinson, owners of Bloom Wine Bar & Florals. PHOTO BY ZACH ADAMS

Like Bloom Wine Bar, Arlington's Catering and Historic Venue was sponsored by Downtown Springfield, Inc. to attend the workshop. Co-owner Brian Reilly now uses ChatGPT and Claude to create routine checklists and to scale recipes for large crowds.

"For instance, I can tell ChatGPT I need to make a list of cleaning procedures, and it does a very good job of finding those things for me that I would otherwise have to spend a lot of time researching," Reilly said.

As for scaling recipes, AI is invaluable. "There's a lot of math that goes into taking a recipe that I might have built for 25-30 people and scaling that for, say, 330 people," Reilly said. "It really helps on a fast turnaround. Also, AI has certainly saved us some time when we're doing conversions, such as a bakery item that we are trying to make in mass quantities with all kinds of different measurements."

He said he feels strongly, though, about not using AI when it might take a job away from a human.

"I try to be very careful about using in ways that are not taking money out of the hands of entrepreneurs such as graphic artists," he said. "We want to use it to make ourselves more efficient and put more money in our pocket because we can get more things done in a shorter amount of time."

He's found that the accuracy of AI results hinges on correct input. "Sometimes the way that I feed it information may be inaccurate,

but I've caught those pretty quickly," he said. "I've started screenshotting a recipe and putting that into the program I'm using, and that avoids my user error. It might take a time or two, but it's been pretty accurate."

Another workshop participant, Tracy Dowell, is the owner of Springfield Running Center on West White Oaks Drive, a full-service store specializing in walking, running, work and everyday shoes and accessories. She said since participating in the workshop, she has become more confident and

proficient in using AI in day-to-day business including accounting, inventory management and forecasting.

"My staff and I now rely on it daily for fresh ideas and support," Dowell said. She said she currently works with Claude, ChatGPT, Grok and Gemini and uses Nano Banana for image generation.

"One of the most valuable things I learned was how to cross-reference information between platforms – building on and fact-checking results from one AI with another," she said. "For example, I'll give Claude clear instructions on tone and the information I'm looking for, then take that result into ChatGPT to expand on it and verify accuracy. This approach gives me deeper, more well-rounded search and consistently more reliable information for my business."

All acknowledge the uncertainty about how AI will expand and change, but they also all expect AI platforms and usages to grow. "I don't think anyone can truly say they know where AI is going within their business," Dowell said.

"From what I have gathered, it's reinventing all the time, constantly in flux with new upgrades and functionality," Reilly said. "It's not completely natural for me yet, but its advantages in certain aspects of what we do have certainly outweighed the disadvantages."

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Growth Alliance chosen for pilot research program

Workforce and infrastructure data will help create economic development strategies

By Molly Wallace



Ryan McCrady, president and CEO of the Springfield Sangamon Growth Alliance. PHOTO COURTESY SSGA

The Springfield Sangamon Growth Alliance will be one of eight organizations in Illinois to partner with the Illinois Economic Development Corporation's Economic Research Center in the inaugural cohort of the Regional Research Pilot Program (R2P2).

The program will give the Growth Alliance access to the databases, and experts in analyzing these databases, used by site selectors to advise companies about where they should locate.

"You could give a business a free site, a free building, a free warehouse to locate, but if the talent of the workforce doesn't exist there, they're not coming," said Ryan McCrady, president and CEO of the Growth Alliance. "It doesn't matter that everything's free if we can't get the workers."

Site selectors typically have access to demographic, geographic, labor market and market access data for regions. Companies often rely on them to recommend locations with workers specializing in occupations they need filled.

Throughout the one-year program that began on July 1, the state's Economic Development Corporation will work with the Growth Alliance to develop strategies for stimulating economic growth in Springfield and Sangamon County.

Abby Powell, the Growth Alliance's director of business development, said the last time the Growth Alliance did a comprehensive study of the

industries and infrastructure that may make the area attractive to businesses was seven years ago – before the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Our community has added a lot of jobs in the last five years or so since the pandemic," Powell said. "We've had new primary employers enter the market, with REEL Co. and Amazon distribution, with the new data center that's going to start construction. That's going to change the landscape for the employment opportunities for people in our community. I think it will also send a signal to other industries."

The unemployment rate in Sangamon County spiked in 2020 to 8.3% but has stayed steady at around 4.5% since 2022, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. An Amazon distribution center opened in Springfield in 2025, and the international crane manufacturing firm REEL USA Corp. moved into Springfield's west side earlier this year.

Government is the largest employment sector in Sangamon County, followed by healthcare and retail.

Springfield will also likely be home to a new data center, a project the Growth Alliance has supported, despite vocal criticism and even a lawsuit brought by nearby residents. The CyrusOne data center will have a minimum of 25 employees in late 2027, according to the memorandum of understanding between CyrusOne and the Illinois

Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. The company's website states the data center will generate 100 permanent jobs.

Amanda Vinicky, the vice president of communications for the Illinois Economic Development Corporation, said the data center was not a factor in the organization's decision to partner with the Growth Alliance.

The Economic Development Corporation selected the Growth Alliance for a combination of factors, including the age of the organization (eight years), the geographic diversity of Sangamon County and its location in the capital city, according to Robin Ficke, the senior vice president of research, and Kate Lindgren, the director of research and regional analysis.

"Springfield is our capital city, and as you know, they are undergoing remote work changes and things like that," said Lindgren. "I think there's also a lot of opportunity there for us to really understand how we can assist with the economic trajectory of the heart of the state there."

Molly Wallace is a graduate student at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism specializing in investigative journalism. She has a bachelor's in religious studies and a master's in philosophy. She is interning at Illinois Times, gaining hands-on experience in a newsroom.

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Businesses should consider cyber insurance

As cybersecurity threats grow, it has become an important risk management tool

By Ed Wojcicki

Cybersecurity threats are one of the fastest-growing areas of concerns for businesses across almost every industry and in companies of almost every size, according to Nicholas Koch of Troxell, a Springfield-based insurance company.

"You only hear about the large companies, but the regular person would be shocked at how often cyber incidents are happening in every community," Koch said.

The success and sophistication of cyber criminals seeking to hack into business records and operations – and sometimes demanding large sums of money – is leading to a growing interest in cyber insurance as companies seek protection against cyber threats. Businesses and individuals are targeted daily in emails, texts and links that tempt users to click on or download something malicious. Sometimes the threats appear to come from a coworker or friend or someone in your contacts, and it is unclear at first glance whether the message or file is legitimate and personally intended for you.

"Many successful cyber events begin with what appears to be a routine email," Koch said.

Attackers may pretend to be a vendor sending an invoice that needs to be paid, or they might pose as someone in the same company who mentions a confidential – but fake – transaction or a need to change someone's bank information for direct deposit. Employees who trust the source and provide such information can provide an opening for the attacker to hack into a company's files and steal information or money.

In some of the worst cases, attackers freeze all a company's files and demand ransom payments to unlock the files. Cyber insurance can cover repayment of ransom, according to consultant Kurtis Minder, who has assisted "quite a few" Illinois businesses that have been hacked.



Nicholas Koch, an insurance consultant with Troxell, specializes in cyber insurance for businesses.

PHOTO BY TERRY FARMER PHOTOGRAPHY

"Some of these [Illinois] cases were solved without paying a ransom; others elected to pay," Minder said.

Cyber insurance has other benefits. First-party insurance coverage addresses losses and expenses of the affected business, while third-party coverage, Koch said, "may help address claims made by customers, vendors or regulators alleging damages related to a cyber incident or data breach."

"A cyber incident can lead to lost income, business interruption, legal expenses, notification costs and damage to customer trust," Koch said. "The value of the policy is not only the insurance coverage but also access to specialized response teams and resources immediately after an event occurs."

Koch and Minder classify cyber insurance as a risk management tool, but Koch says it still is not as common as liability insurance.

"Understanding cyber insurance helps business owners evaluate their exposure and determine whether they have a plan in place to help respond to and recover from these types of events," Koch said.

Minder said whether a company needs cyber insurance is "highly variable" depending on the business, adding it generally makes sense, but not for all businesses.

Beyond insurance to protect your company if an attack does occur, Koch and Minder

recommend strong cyber security practices and policies to help prevent being targeted in the first place. For one, do not use your business email for anything other than business purposes, Minder said. That means not signing up for external newsletters and social media accounts with your business email, which can provide an inside track for hackers.

Other good "cyber hygiene" practices include updating software with patches that often provide security enhancements, using multi-factor authentication, and not reusing

passwords. And, as Minder said simply in a 2022 TED Talk, "Stop clicking on things."

It can be difficult to take legal action against hackers and scammers because duped people often unwittingly and voluntarily chose to give away money or information. In addition, most attackers are based in foreign countries where they won't be extradited or prosecuted, Minder said.

Businesses must be on the alert for both scammers and hackers, Koch said. "A hacker typically gains unauthorized access to systems or accounts through technical means, while a scammer may rely on deception, such as impersonating a vendor or executive, to convince someone to voluntarily send money," he said.

A newer factor is artificial intelligence. Minder said he is seeing hackers increasingly use AI "to better understand the data they have stolen, synthesizing large data sets to find the most valuable artifacts, like financial data, personal information, etc. [And] we are now seeing the threat actors using AI to develop and execute the actual attacks." **SBJ**

Ed Wojcicki has a degree in journalism, worked 26 years for print publications and now freelances from Springfield.



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2	MSF&W Consulting 3445 Liberty Drive Springfield, IL 62704	217-698-3535 msfw.com info@msfw.com	Laurie King, CEO John Marucco, CSO Brent Engelman, COO	170		○		MSF&W is a woman-owned IT consulting firm that has been serving clients for over 35 years. We specialize in IT strategy, application development, AI solutions, digital transformation, project management, data analytics and web accessibility. Our team of dedicated professionals transforms complex business challenges into practical, high quality technology solutions that drive innovation and deliver measurable results for our clients.	1991
3	CDS Office Technologies 612 S. Dirksen Parkway Springfield, IL 62703	217-528-8936 cdsot.com	Mark Watson	164	○		○	Managed technology services including: IT support, cybersecurity, network planning and installation, compliance (PCI, HIPAA, etc.) and technology projects. Free cybersecurity risk assessments for a limited time. CDS also offers VoIP phone systems and multifunction printer solutions with leasing and purchase options available.	1971
4	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
5	Aggieland Software, Inc. 15 S. Old State Capitol Plaza, Fl. 2 Springfield, IL 62701	224-601-5241 aggielandsoftware.com info@aggielandsoftware.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	217-522-8575 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. We specialize in connecting buildings with fiber to optimize business and campus networks from design to final construction.	1996
7	Agility Technologies NA LLC 1209 S. Fourth St. Ste. B Springfield, IL 62703	217-391-9292 agilitytechna.com sales@agilitytechna.com	Corey Taylor, president and CEO Jennifer Taylor, executive vice president Mitch Nelson, vice president of finance	16	○	○	○	Structured cabling and wiring services, surveillance cameras (CCTV/IP), burglar alarms, fire alarms, access control systems, life-safety, managed IT services, managed hosted voice services (phone), managed cloud services, managed network security, cyber security, compliance, data backup computers, servers, telephone services, managed/outsourced IT services. telephone services and managed/outsourced IT services.	2008
8	King Technology, Inc. 3 N. Old State Capitol Plaza Springfield, IL 62701	217-522-6700 kingtech.net info@kingtech.net	M. Kay King	14	○	○	○	KingTech is your trusted provider of advanced technology solutions and expert support for 35 years. Serving both businesses and individuals, KingTech offers a comprehensive range of IT products and services from enterprise-grade hardware and software to worry-free IT support with fast, prompt service you can count on. With a strong focus on reliability, scalability and customer satisfaction, KingTech.net delivers dependable solutions that empower clients to operate more efficiently, securely and confidently in today's fast paced digital landscape.	1991
8	Heart Technologies 301 E. Laurel St., Ste. B Springfield, IL 62703	217-544-3100 heart.net sfeipel@heart.net	Sheila Feipel	14	○		○	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
9	AmeriCall Communications 447 N. Walnut St. Springfield, IL 62702	217-522-2255 217-522-2257 americallinc.com mpatton@americallinc.com	Gene Dinardo Melanie McDaniel Joe Ushman	11	○		○	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
9	Cave Interactive Media P.O. Box 414 Williamsville, IL 62693	217-496-6755 caveim.com hi@caveim.com	Denny Cave	11		○		Website design and development, custom web application development and WordPress-based solutions including e-commerce, multisite networks and performance optimized hosting.	2003
10	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



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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
10	Anderson Electric, Inc. 3501 Sixth St. Frontage Road W Springfield, IL 62703	217-529-5471 anderson-electric.com rodneym@anderson-electric.com	Employee owned	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.	1984
10	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
11	Hanson Information Systems, Inc. 2433 W. White Oaks Drive Springfield, IL 62704	217-726-2400 hansoninfosys.com info@hansonhosted.com	Raj Mohanty, president	9	○	○	○	Hanson Information Systems, Inc., is an SOC-2 compliant technology service provider with the following services: network 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 anti-malware software, disaster recovery, cloud computing, Hanson Cloud Drive, collaboration tool, enterprise cyber security suite and general technology support.	1997
12	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. Telephone bill analysis. 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
13	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
14	Sangamon Connect Inc. 6000 Industrial Drive Curran, IL 62670	217-310-1010 sangamonconnect.com sales@sangamonconnect.com	Brian McLean Chris Oury	6			○	Advanced hosted VOIP services, customized to the customer's needs. Business voice, SMS, video, fax, call center, contact center and SIP trunks. Integrations for teams, paging systems, door phones/entry. Locally owned and operated with customer service and support professionals.	2023
15	Zion Creative (By appointment only) Sherman	217-725-2031 zioncreative.co hello@zioncreative.co	Nick VanMeter	5	○		○	Professional advertising and creative solutions, specializing in brand identity development and website design.	2017
15	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, copywriting, search engine optimization, ongoing creative services, GoTime360.com (CRM & marketing platform including workflow automations, reputation management, lead capture, SMS & Email marketing), ArtofHi.com (AI-generated send on demand greeting cards).	2008
15	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
15	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	Motion VOIP 3309 Robbins Road Springfield, IL 62704	217-331-6670 motionvoip.com sales@motionvoip.com	Craig Lansing	5		○		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 and networking.	2002
16	Hupp Information Technologies, Inc. 2922 Cronin Dr. 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
16	Khamma Group, LLC 307 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
17	Avrom Systems 4196 Spaulding Orchard Road Springfield, IL 62711	217-899-9175 avromsystems.com info@avromsystems.com	Harv Koplo	3	○			IT Consulting & Support for small business and municipalities. Includes computer Remote Monitoring & Management, Cloud-based IP phone systems and Cloud accessible video surveillance systems.	1983
17	Altin Systems Springfield, IL	217-622-4856 altinsystems.com info@altinsystems.com	Peyman Esmailzadegan	3	○	○	○	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.	2016
18	MAM/COMM1 Services, Inc. 1427 S. Eighth St. Springfield, IL 62703	217-522-8942 mamcomm1.com mamcomm@mamcomm1.com	Sean Milburn	2	○	○		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

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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	Mark Watson	160	○	○	○	○	○	○	Managed-technology services including: IT support, cyber-security, network planning and installation, compliance (PCI, HIPAA, etc.) and technology projects. Free cybersecurity risk assessments for a limited time. CDS also offers VoIP phone systems and multifunction printer solutions with leasing and purchase options available.	1971
2	Barcom Security & Fire 386 S. Koke Mill Road Springfield IL 62711	800-642-5413 barcomsecurity.com mtrader@barcomsecurity.com	Matt Trader, vice president	95	○	○	○	○	○	○	Local family-owned-and-operated, full-service life-safety integrator, fire alarms, intrusion alarms, access control, video surveillance, mobile surveillance units, nurse call, intercom systems, fire alarm functional and sensitivity inspections, Five Diamond UL certified central station monitoring, elevator monitoring, design build engineers on staff, union NICET certified install and service technicians.	1976
3	Senergy Technologies 509 N. Elm St. Williamsville, IL 62693	217-566-2826 senergy.io	Matthew J. Giacomini, president Brandon M. Keafer, PE, CEO	60	○	○	○	○	○	○	Locally owned and operated. Design-build and design-assist enterprise physical security and technology solutions including CCTV, access control, intrusion detection, advanced AI analytics, weapons detection, mobile security trailers, paging, intercom and audio/visual. Offer managed services on all systems.	2014
4	George Alarm 917 S. Ninth St. Springfield, IL 62703	217-525-1334 georgealarm.com sales@georgealarm.com	Doug George, president Zach Carlson, general manager	40	○	○	○	○	○	○	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
5	Young's Security Systems, Inc. 440 N. First St. Springfield, IL 62702	217-744-9000 youngs-security.com jhavay@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 fire, security, camera, door access control, entry door security and medical alert systems. Wired, wireless and hybrid systems. All systems are phone app compatible.	1985
6	Central Illinois Security A Levi, Ray & Shoup, Inc. Company 2451 W. Monroe St. Springfield, IL 62704	217-787-4970 centralillinoissecurity.com kmicheletta@centralillinoissecurity.com	Dick Levi, chairman Kenny Micheletta, 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.	1979
7	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 and access control for commercial and government agencies. Dispatched technicians available.	1945
8	Heart Technologies 301 E. Laurel Springfield, IL 62703	217-544-3100 heart.net how to alternate color rows in Indesign - Google Search Apple sfeipel@heart.net	Sheila Feipel	14	○	○	○	○	○	○	Fire and intrusion security, design, installation and testing, NICET certified, door access control and video cameras, paging, intercom and voice evacuation.	1987
9	Anderson Electric, Inc. 3501 Sixth St. Frontage Road W Springfield, IL 62703	217-529-5471 anderson-electric.com rodneym@anderson-electric.com	Employee owned	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.	1984
10	AmeriCall Communications 477 N. Walnut St. Springfield, IL 62702	217-522-2255 americallinc.com mpatton@americallinc.com	Gene Dinardo Melanie McDaniel Joe Ushman	9	○	○	○	○	○	○	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
11	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 and networking.	2002
12	Lloyd IT Services, LLC 319 E. 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 managed services, VoIP, access control, security camera systems, server/computer sales and service, Wi-Fi, network security, network cabling and more.	2015



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Supporting local charities with local dollars

American Business Club celebrates a century of giving

By Janet Seitz

While the American Business Club of Springfield is part of the national AMBUCS nonprofit organization, its impact has been locally focused for 100 years.

"Springfield volunteers raising Springfield dollars impacting Springfield lives," said Kevin Lust, one of the club's recent presidents.

Lust said ABC of Springfield is "dedicated to inspiring people to conquer challenges related to mobility and independence and to investing in our community more broadly through our support of local charities and deserving causes."

ABC was formed in 1925 to foster fellowship and cooperation among its members. National AMBUCS owns and operates Amtryke LLC, which designs and manufactures adaptive tricycles. ABC is most well-known for providing Amtrykes for children and veterans who cannot ride a standard bike, Lust said.

"When you watch a child with different abilities receive a trike fitted just for them – often the first bike they've ever been on – you witness in real time why we do what we do," he said. "Add to that witnessing the real results that the charities, school groups and teams, church groups and civic clubs enjoy through the support we provide, and you witness in real time why this club has lasted a century."

Lust said therapists attest that the Amtrykes build strength and coordination. "But parents talk about something better: their child riding alongside siblings and neighborhood kids for the first time," he said. "That's independence, and it changes how kids see themselves, whether they realize it or not."

Current ABC President Trent Thompson joined the club in early 2018 and soon had his first experience building Amtrykes for the club to distribute. "Thinking about the emotions I experienced and the joy we gave that day – I have been all in ever since," he said.

Thompson said that each Amtryke giveaway is a rewarding experience. "But the first time I was contacted by a mom who said, 'We no longer need the Amtryke,' my heart dropped. But then she added, 'It has helped him so much that he can now ride a



Waylon is one of the local children who has been gifted a custom-designed tricycle by the ABC and has become an ambassador for the club. PHOTO COURTESY KEVIN LUST

two-wheeled bicycle."

Thompson recalled a particularly memorable event when a very small, fragile child was lifted from his full-support wheelchair and placed on his specially designed Amtryke. "Dad began to push, his arms and legs began to move," he said, "and Grandma started crying and burst out with, 'It's the first time he has ever smiled.'"

Lust said that one of the club's favorite Amtryke stories is about "our guy Waylon," who received his first Amtryke in 2024 and since has graduated to a bigger model.

"He has ridden his Amtryke to lead our entry in the St. Patrick's Day parade since then and has become quite the celebrity along the way," Lust said. "He often acts as an Amtryke ambassador when others are receiving their bikes and is a big hit at every event he attends. He has so much fun that his dad ended up joining the club."

In addition to the Amtryke efforts, ABC's giving also supports dozens of Springfield area charities. Overall, the club has distributed nearly \$6 million over the life of the organization. A significant amount

of those funds resulted from contracts to manage gate admissions at the Illinois State Fair since 2004 and manage concessions in the Grandstand since 1954. Volunteers provide assistance to run the events, and in return the ABC donates to each organization that volunteers.

While ABC still will be involved in gate admissions, the club recently lost its long-term concessions contract for the fair. Thompson said the club is proud to still be active at the fairgrounds "in a big way" – with members staffing the admission gates with their volunteer partners. He said ABC is evaluating new fundraising events and partnerships so that its giving doesn't depend on any one endeavor.

"Surprisingly, it's a great time to be an AMBUC," he said. "We'll still be supporting over 60 charities through our Illinois State Fair admissions project, last year donating nearly \$130,000 there. Our volunteer efforts at the Grandstand funded decades of charitable giving. We're not sure how, nor even if, we can replace that. But our commitment hasn't changed, and we're determined to do as much, if not more, even if we do it in other ways."

Thompson said keeping the volunteer pipeline full can be challenging, an issue faced by many other service organizations. ABC's model depends on members giving many hours, such as long days at the Illinois State Fair, and recruiting the next generation of members who will continue these efforts.

"We deeply appreciate all the support we've received from the community over the years," Thompson said. "For now, if you know a child or veteran who could benefit from an Amtryke, let us know. If you're part of a group or organization that could help us manage gate admissions, we want to hear from you. If you are interested in learning more about ABC, reach out to a member." **SBJ**

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

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Ceremony honors faculty leadership, pioneers of academic medicine

The June 29 investiture ceremony at the Memorial Learning Center in Springfield recognized three faculty leaders whose careers have shaped surgery, plastic surgery and emergency medicine across central and southern Illinois. Dr. Michael Neumeister was invested as the J. Roland Folse, MD, Endowed Chair of Surgery. Dr. Nicole Sommer became the Elvin G. Zook, MD, Endowed Chair of Plastic Surgery. Dr. James Waymack was invested as the David L. Griffen, MD, PhD, Endowed Chair of Emergency Medicine.

The chairs are supported through endowments held at the Memorial Foundation, with investments from Memorial Health, colleagues, patients, friends and community members in the future of academic medicine.

While the evening celebrated the future, many speakers credited the leaders whose vision laid a foundation for success, tracing the honorees' achievements to the physicians who built SIU School of Medicine more than 50 years ago.

Founding Dean Dr. Richard Moy recruited department chairs willing to leave established careers for the uncertainty of creating a new medical school in Springfield. Among them were Dr. J. Roland Folse, who developed a nationally respected Department of Surgery, and Dr. Elvin G. Zook, whose innovations in plastic surgery and resident education influenced generations of surgeons. Years later, Dr. David L. Griffen established SIU's Department of Emergency Medicine, extending that same culture of academic medicine into one of the nation's newest specialties.

The institution they built was reflected as much in the stories shared as in the honors presented.

Introducing Neumeister, Folse drew laughter when he credited the longtime surgeon not only for leading the department but also for "keeping me going" as his personal physician. The



Three faculty members with SIU School of Medicine were named Endowed Chairs at a June 29 ceremony at the Memorial Learning Center in Springfield. From left to right: Dr. Michael Neumeister, Dr. Nicole Sommer and Dr. James Waymack.
PHOTO COURTESY SIU SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

lighthearted remark underscored a friendship forged over decades of shared work and mutual respect.

Former faculty member Dr. Robert Russell recalled the early years of SIU's Institute for Plastic Surgery, where innovation was expected and scholarship was considered an obligation. Under Zook's leadership, faculty were challenged to publish, teach, present nationally and give back to the profession. That philosophy helped produce an extraordinary number of graduates who later became presidents of national surgical societies.

Rather than recite Neumeister's curriculum vitae, friend and colleague Dr. Brad Schwartz described the person behind the accomplishments: a hockey player, sailor, humanitarian, musician, husband, father and grandfather.

Neumeister turned attention back to Folse, recalling how he accepted Richard Moy's invitation to build SIU's Department of Surgery before recruiting an extraordinary group of founding division chiefs – including Zook, David Sumner and Alan Birtch – who transformed Springfield into a destination for surgical education.

"We are the home of surgical education because of the pioneering work of Dr. Roland Folse," Neumeister said.

If Neumeister's investiture celebrated mentorship, Sommer's celebrated legacy.

Sommer became the holder of the endowed

chair established in honor of her father, Dr. Elvin G. Zook.

Her sister, Dr. Tara Bennett, recalled the family's move to Springfield in 1973 after someone questioned why her father would leave Indiana University for a place where "there was nothing."

"Exactly," Zook replied. "I'm going to build something great."

Over three decades, Zook created one of the nation's premier plastic surgery training programs while helping

establish the academic culture that still defines SIU School of Medicine. Bennett said that, despite his remarkable professional achievements, her father considered the residents he trained as his greatest legacy.

Sommer has built an equally distinguished career as a surgeon, educator, researcher and national leader. Accepting the endowed chair bearing her father's name, she pledged to honor his vision by continuing to support resident education and research through the endowment.

The final investiture demonstrated that SIU's culture now extends well beyond its founding departments.

Waymack entered the school's inaugural emergency medicine residency class 16 years ago. His mentors described an Eagle Scout whose quiet preparation, work ethic and integrity steadily carried him from resident to chief resident, faculty member, residency director and department chair.

"Ultimately," Waymack said, "we will not be measured by our academic accomplishments. We'll be measured by the people we serve – the students we inspire, the residents we train, the faculty we develop and, most importantly, the outcomes of the patients who come to us in their time of need."

His words captured the spirit of an evening of celebration and affirmation. **SB**



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WOMEN'S EVENT CALENDAR

WE-CI to Honor Outstanding Women Entrepreneurs

Women Entrepreneurs of Central Illinois (WE-CI) will recognize women making a lasting impact on central Illinois during its Summer Social on Wednesday, Aug. 12, from 5:30-7 p.m. at Island Bay Yacht Club.

The event will feature presentations by last year's recipients, who will honor this year's winners in categories including WE-CI Warrior, Most Innovative, Community Champion, New & Emerging Business, and the organization's Hall of Fame Award. The awards celebrate leadership, innovation, service and entrepreneurial spirit among WE-CI members.

Registration is required.
Details are available at wecispringfield.org

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Environmental issues in commercial real estate

By Thomas C. Pavlik, Jr.

Environmental issues regarding real estate may seem commonplace these days, but the implications have real-world consequences for the uninformed.

Imagine you've bought your first piece of income-producing property. After several months, you discover the prior owner dumped contaminants out the back door, and now the Environmental Protection Agency wants you to clean up the property. It may sound farfetched, but this is a routine occurrence throughout Illinois.

Federal and state laws impose liability for environmental remediation costs on current and, in many instances, prior landowners. Depending on the facts, a party may be held responsible for all or a substantial portion of remediation costs, even if that party did not cause the contamination. It's called "cradle to grave" liability.

There is a common way to escape such liability. Both federal and state law provide the "bona fide prospective purchaser" of land with immunity from that liability. If this standard is met, the property owner cannot be held liable for past contamination, only for "new contamination." How, then, does one go about establishing him or herself as a "bona fide prospective purchaser?"

The usual way is to undertake an "all appropriate inquiries" analysis. This generally involves employing an environmental consultant to conduct what is known as a Phase I. Under Illinois law, a Phase I assessment that indicates property is clean is the type of evidence used to establish the innocent purchaser defense. Federal law, although not stating it in so many words, essentially says the same thing.

A Phase I provides a historical review and reconnaissance of a property to identify recognized environmental conditions. Those conditions may be past or present and may be located on the property or adjacent to it. The recognized environmental conditions are then evaluated with regard to potential environmental impact to the property. A Phase I seeks to balance the cost of a site assessment with the objective of reducing uncertainty. Phase I assessments typically include a review of various public records,



a site "reconnaissance" and personal interviews. They can be performed only by qualified environmental consultants, and the costs are generally reasonable for the protection they afford.

Phase I assessments are not guarantees the land is clean. Rather, they are designed to satisfy the innocent purchaser defense and to reduce potential uncertainties. If a Phase I raises any red flags, additional investigation is often advisable and frequently necessary, but not every recognized environmental condition automatically requires additional due diligence.

This further investigation usually involves the Phase II inspection. A Phase II, building on a Phase I, includes testing the soil and groundwater for contaminants. A Phase II that confirms the absence of significant contamination can substantially reduce environmental risk and may strengthen a purchaser's ability to demonstrate compliance with bona fide purchaser defenses.

But what if contamination is found on the property you are considering purchasing?

Beyond establishing the innocent purchaser defense to liability, there are additional reasons to incur the time and expense of environmental due diligence. The smart property purchaser includes an "escape clause" in the sales contract so he or she can walk away from the deal if contamination is found. Absent such a clause, the law may well require the buyer to close irrespective of the contamination.

There are other reasons to go through

this environmental due diligence. Assuming you are financing your purchase, your bank will ask about the proposed property's environmental status. Banks are generally excluded from liability if they ever have to take the title to a property from a delinquent borrower. The real issue, however, is that a bank will have a difficult, if not impossible, time selling environmentally contaminated land to recoup its debt. Accordingly, depending on the nature of the transaction, many banks require at least a Phase I before making a mortgage loan on any significant purchase.

Moreover, even if no remediation is required and the contaminants do not affect your proposed property use, the very presence of contamination might stigmatize the property in the eyes of any future purchasers, thereby reducing the property's potential sales price. Perhaps that is a risk you are willing to take, but environmental due diligence can let you intelligently assess the risk.

And if you think you can ignore environmental issues and rely on your insurance to protect you, you best think again. Virtually without exception, your insurance will not provide coverage. Most all insurance now includes the so-called "absolute pollution exclusion." Due to this provision, interpreted by Illinois courts in the insurance companies' favor, and for many other reasons, the chance of collecting on any insurance policy is small enough to be non-existent.

Given the enormous potential liabilities associated with environmental contamination, as well as the uncertainty associated with remediation costs, proper environmental due diligence should become an integral part of every transaction. As with so many other situations, forewarned is truly forearmed.

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By Thomas C. Pavlik, Jr.

PHOTO BY ZACH ADAMS

If you grew up in the 1990s, a visit to The Spot 90's Bar & Grill is likely to trigger a wave of nostalgia that approaches sensory overload. Located on Ginger Creek Drive on Springfield's west side, The Spot pays homage to a decade that gave us everything from grunge music and compact discs to Adam Sandler movies and some of the more questionable fashion choices in modern history.

Although my guest and I are more children of the 1980s, we found ourselves spending almost as much time looking around the restaurant as we did studying the menu.

The dining room is an unabashed celebration of the 1990s. Compact discs adorn the ceiling and catch the light from an assortment of brightly colored neon accents, furniture and wall art. One entire wall is devoted to *Happy Gilmore*, a movie that remains required viewing for anyone who enjoys golf or simply appreciates one-liners that have somehow survived three decades.

My favorite decoration, however, was the Callahan Auto Parts shirt prominently displayed among the memorabilia. Look it up if you don't get the reference. A hint – any restaurant willing to dedicate wall space to Chris Farley automatically earns a few points in my book.

The soundtrack is also from the 1990s, which pales in comparison to the 1980s. Disagree? Email and let us know why.

Perhaps what we most appreciated was that the nostalgia seemed genuine and not the work of some overpaid corporate consultant who used too many focus groups. Instead, it felt like an enthusiastic collection assembled by someone who genuinely loved the decade.

Of course, nostalgia can get customers through the front door, but food is what brings them back.

The Spot's menu creatively describes dishes with reference to various cultural moments from the 1990s. Some made instant sense while for others, we had to reach back into our memory banks. No matter, though, as The Spot's menu is about what you would expect for upscale bar food.

A few of the more interesting items included the She's All That sandwich (sa-



The former Finley's Tap House on Springfield's west side has been reinvented as The Spot 90's Bar and Grill, complete with period décor. PHOTO BY ZACH ADAMS

lami, prosciutto, mozzarella and fig jam on a toasted baguette), the Mixtape pizza (fig jam, mozzarella, goat cheese, red onion, prosciutto, spinach, hot honey and balsamic – eclectic enough to resemble some of my mix tapes back in the day) and the Smells Like Brussels Spirit appetizer (smoked bacon, sweet chili, crispy onion strings, scallions and sriracha aioli). And yes, there's at least one dish with the latest (and most overdone) food trend: hot honey. Please, just stop already.

We decided to pass on appetizers ("snacks" in 1990s speak, apparently) because each item looked like more food than we wanted. Instead, we focused on the salad, sandwich and burger section of the menu. For those



A smashburger with American cheese and fries. PHOTO BY ZACH ADAMS

who want something a little more elevated, there's also a separate entrée section.

I ordered the single smashburger with American cheese. It was close to what a smashburger should be. The beef was properly seared but missing the crispy edges that distinguish a great smashburger from a good one. The burger remained juicy, the

toppings were appropriately balanced, and the bun held together until the final bite, although a toasted bun would have been a nice touch. When it comes to pickles, my decided preference is for the simple dill variety. The Spot's had a touch of sweetness and resembled more of an artisanal pickle. They added a pleasant and different hint of acid that pulled it all together. The fries were crispy on the

outside and fluffy on the inside and were well-seasoned. Portions were appropriate for the price. The sauce was, to my palate, the one real weak spot: It was too mayo-centric with no real flavor. Mayo is proof that even eggs can make poor life choices. I was glad I got it on the side.

My friend's brisket sandwich was a success. The meat was reported as tender and flavorful without being overwhelmed by the horseradish sauce or the melted provolone. Brisket is one of those items that reveals whether a kitchen knows what it's doing. Done improperly, it's dry, stringy and disappointing. Done correctly, it achieves a balance between smoke, seasoning and tenderness. For a non-barbecue restaurant, The Spot's version trended decidedly to the latter.

Service throughout the meal was friendly and attentive. Drinks remained filled, and food arrived promptly; the overall experience felt organized, despite a healthy crowd. My guest and I particularly appreciated the offer to send us off with to-go glasses of our drinks – a nice touch.

Springfield diners have more options today than ever before, particularly on the west side of town. The Spot appears to have found a niche by combining comfort food with a unique atmosphere. Whether you're looking to relive the decade of CD players and movie rental stores or simply searching for a good burger, The Spot is worthy of a place on your list of restaurants to visit.

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The risk (and assurance) of avoiding risk

By Kelly Gust

Picture two leaders sitting in the same meeting: The first hears a bold new idea and immediately thinks, "This is exciting. It could transform our business."

The second hears that same idea and thinks, "That is a crazy idea, and it will never work."

Too often, we celebrate the first leader as innovative and quietly dismiss the second as resistant to change. But organizations need both.

Behavioral assessments, such as the Predictive Index Assessment or Everything DiSC, remind us that people are wired differently. Some naturally gravitate toward possibility, change and calculated risk. Others instinctively look for stability, consistency and potential pitfalls. Neither approach is better. Each serves a different, but equally important, purpose.

As leaders, our challenge isn't deciding which mindset is right. It's learning how to harness both. That idea came to mind recently as I reread Chapter 10 of Bob Iger's *The Ride of a Lifetime*, titled "Massive Risks That Make Perfect Sense." At first glance, the title seems contradictory. How can a massive risk make perfect sense?

Iger's point is that the best decisions aren't reckless. Rather, they're well understood. Disney's acquisitions of Pixar, Marvel, Lucasfilm and 21st Century Fox looked incredibly risky from the outside. But they

weren't impulsive bets. They were the result of thoughtful analysis, a clear strategic vision and confidence that the long-term opportunity outweighed the risks.

In other words, the risk wasn't ignored; it was understood. The distinction matters.

Many organizations unknowingly or unintentionally reward only one side of the equation. They either celebrate boldness at all costs or become so focused on avoiding mistakes that they miss opportunities altogether.

The strongest organizations strike a balance: They eliminate unnecessary risk while embracing necessary risk.

For example, consider a project team adopting a new technology that could improve productivity. Someone immediately sees the competitive advantage. Someone else wonders how it will affect training, safety, schedules or quality.

An estimator, investor or scientist might question assumptions, while an operations leader might consider the financial exposure. It can look and sound like disagreement, when in reality it's just sound decision making. Healthy teams don't silence the people who ask difficult questions. They invite them into the conversation. Those questions don't slow progress, they improve it by ultimately building stronger outcomes.

The same is true in leadership: If everyone around the table loves taking risks,

who is making sure you've considered the downside? If everyone is focused on protecting what already exists, who is challenging the team to think bigger? The most successful leaders I've worked with aren't the smartest people in every room; they're the ones who intentionally build teams with different perspectives and then create an environment where those perspectives are genuinely heard.

The goal isn't always consensus but, rather, better decision-making. That's especially important in today's business environment. Markets change. Technology evolves. Customer expectations shift. Playing it safe can be risky, but so can moving too fast without asking the hard questions. Both boldness and caution are essential.

The next time someone in a meeting challenges your idea or points out everything that could go wrong, resist the urge to see them as an obstacle. They may be protecting your organization from a blind spot you haven't considered.

Likewise, if someone is pushing the team toward a bold opportunity, don't dismiss them as reckless. They may be seeing a future that others haven't imagined yet. Big risks can equal big reward but only when tested by thoughtful questions and the people willing to ask them. **SBJ**

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