

INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS CONFERENCE



THE MODERN ENTREPRENEUR:
CREATING SHARED VALUE WORLDWIDE

2026



MARCH 10 | 10:30AM - 8:30PM | ALUMNI HALL

Northeastern Illinois University - Main Campus



**Check out
our website**

neu.edu/ibc

WELCOME TO THE CONFERENCE

10:30AM - 10:50AM

Welcome Remarks and Introduction

Michael Bedell, Ph.D, Dean and Professor, NEIU College of Business and Technology

10:50AM - 12:05PM

A Flight Plan for Success: A Proven 4-Step System to Land on Your Dreams

Jacqueline Ruiz, CEO, Author JJR Marketing

12:15PM - 1:30PM

Business Value Growth Advisory: How to take an acquired business and make it better

Bryan Esarco, CPA Vice President, Business Planning Solutions, UMB Bank

1:40PM - 2:55PM

One Book Per Session: The Optimist

Dr. Sungdoo Kim, Associate Professor, Ph.D. NEIU College of Business and Technology

Student Presenters:

William Gibson, Javier Medina, Veronica Nabor

3:05PM - 4:05PM

Women's History Month: Women in Leadership

Carmen Jimenez, Founder, Hispanic Business Network

Ashley Foxx, CEO, Vintage Place Settings

Jacqueline Ruiz, CEO, Author JJR Marketing

4:15PM - 5:30PM

Career/Alumni Panel

Jason Garcia, Founder and Managing Partner, The Higher Law Firm LLC

Maria Flores, Founder and Managing Director Excellzia LLC

Amanda Rossi, Software Engineer, Capital One

5:40PM - 6:55PM

Funding Smarter, Structuring Better: Modern Strategies for Business Growth

Mark Ferguson, Deputy District Director, Illinois District Office, U.S. Small Business Administration

Perran Wetzel, President, PG Wetzel & Associates, Inc

7:05 PM - 8:20 PM

Big Center Pitch Night

Jessica Mueller, Executive Director of Adult Education, Advancement, and Business Innovation, Big Center

Pitchers: Tyris Manney (Tyris Manney Beauty), Ceaira Pascal (Hair Therapy), Mac Varilla (Chi Sports)

AGENDA

Welcome Remarks



10:30 AM - 10:50 AM

MICHAEL BEDELL, PH.D.

**DEAN & PROFESSOR
NEIU CBT DEPARTMENT**

Dr. Michael Bedell is the Dean of the College of Business and Technology at Northeastern Illinois University, where he serves as the chief academic officer and leads the College's strategic direction. He brings extensive academic, corporate, and board experience, including service with Perfect Search Media, GetSet Learning, and Wyzant, as well as active involvement with civic and nonprofit organizations such as the Illinois CPA Society and the Mid-American Business Deans Association, where he is a past president.

Dr. Bedell's expertise spans human resource management, change management, information systems, branding, and operations management, with a strong focus on preparing the future workforce. His leadership has resulted in successful AACSB and ABET accreditations and the expansion of the College through an innovation hub and a community institute offering certificates and executive education. He holds a Ph.D. from Indiana University and earned his MBA and bachelor's degrees from the University of Kansas, with prior corporate experience at Payless ShoeSource/Collective Brands.

A Flight Plan for Success: A Proven 4-Step System to Land on Your Dreams

Every successful journey begins with a clear flight plan. This session presents a proven 4-step system to help you define your destination, navigate obstacles, stay aligned with your goals, and confidently land on your dreams. Designed to be practical and actionable, the talk offers a clear roadmap for turning ambition into achievement.



10:50 AM - 12:05 PM

JACQUELINE RUIZ

CEO, AUTHOR
JJR MARKETING

Jacqueline S. Ruiz is an internationally recognized, award-winning author, speaker, entrepreneur, and pilot. She is the founder of the award-winning public relations firm JJR Marketing and publishing company Fig Factor Media, and a pioneering voice in Latina storytelling. She has authored 37 books and published over 500 titles for authors in 34 countries.

A two-time cancer survivor who immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico at age 14, Jacqueline is among fewer than 1% of Latina pilots in the country and a passionate advocate for aviation, youth, and women's empowerment. Through the Fig Factor Foundation, she mentors young Latinas internationally and inspires audiences worldwide through keynote addresses and leadership programs.

Business Value Growth Advisory: How to take an acquired business and make it better

This session focuses on how to create and grow value after acquiring a business, highlighting proven approaches to operational improvement, strategic planning, and performance optimization. The discussion explores key challenges in post-acquisition integration and the practical steps leaders can take to strengthen operations, enhance profitability, and position an acquired business for long-term growth.



12:15 PM - 1:30 PM

BRYAN ESARCO, CPA

VICE PRESIDENT-BUSINESS
PLANNING SOLUTIONS
UMB BANK

Bryan Esarco is Vice President of Business Planning Solutions at UMB Private Wealth Management and a CPA, CFE, CVA, and Certified Exit Planning Advisor with over 25 years of experience in public accounting, business valuation, and exit planning. He helps business owners increase enterprise value and navigate successful transitions through growth, sales, or mergers and acquisitions.

Previously, Bryan served as CEO of AJE Associates, PC, where he scaled and successfully transitioned the firm at a top market multiple. A university instructor since 1999, he holds degrees from Cardinal Stritch University and UW-Milwaukee, and actively serves with the Illinois CPA Society and local advisory boards.

One Book Per Session: The Optimist

Shaped by bold optimism and rapid innovation, this session explores the race to invent the future through the lens of *The Optimist: Sam Altman, OpenAI, and the Race to Invent the Future*. It examines how AI is transforming industries and society, and what this shift means for leadership and responsibility. **The session will feature student presentations by William Gibson, Javier Medina, and Veronica Nabor.**



1:40 PM - 2:55 PM

DR. SUNGDOO KIM

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, PH.D.
**NEIU COLLEGE OF BUSINESS
AND TECHNOLOGY**

Dr. Sungdoo Kim is an Associate Professor of Management in the College of Business and Technology at Northeastern Illinois University. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Cincinnati and researches how workplace technologies reshape work-nonwork boundaries and the evolving nature of employment relationships.

Dr. Kim has published in leading journals including the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, *AI & Society*, *Human Resource Development Review*, and *Business Horizons*. His work has been recognized with multiple honors, including the NEIU Research Excellence Award, JOHP Best Paper Award Finalist, SHRM Foundation Dissertation Grant, and the NEIU Foundation Stonebreaker Award.

Women's History Month: Women in Leadership

Every impactful journey begins with strong leadership. In celebration of Women's History Month, this session highlights women in management and leadership who are breaking barriers, driving change, and shaping inclusive workplaces. It explores leadership growth, challenges, and the lasting impact of women leaders across industries.



3:05 PM - 4:05 PM

CARMEN JIMENEZ

FOUNDER
HISPANIC BUSINESS NETWORK

Carmen Jimenez is a seasoned public accounting professional with over 18 years of experience, based in Chicago and a proud graduate of DePaul University. She specializes in financial accuracy, compliance, and strategic decision-making for individuals, businesses, and nonprofit organizations. Deeply committed to community impact, Carmen co-founded the Hispanic Business Network 14 years ago, which led to the creation of a foundation and scholarship fund supporting first-generation college students. She believes strong relationship-building is the foundation of effective and meaningful networking. Outside of her professional work, Carmen is a proud mother and a loyal Chicago White Sox fan. She also adores her 104-pound Pitbull granddog, Concrete, who holds a special place in her life.

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ASHLEY FOXX

CEO

VINTAGE PLACE SETTINGS

Ashley Nicole Fox is a Chicago-based entrepreneur, etiquette coach, and educator. She is the founder of ANF Etiquette and owner of Vintage Place Settings, where she specializes in confidence-building and dining etiquette, offering social, personal, and professional etiquette instruction for children, teens, and adults.

Her work is rooted in the belief that etiquette is a learned life skill grounded in self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and respectful communication—not status or formality. Blending traditional etiquette principles with modern application, Ashley emphasizes confidence before correction and intention behind every interaction, teaching etiquette as a foundation for leadership and personal growth.

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Career/Alumni Panel

This Career/Alumni Panel brings together accomplished alumni to share insights from their professional journeys, key lessons learned, and practical advice for navigating today's evolving workplace. Panelists will discuss career growth, leadership development, and the value of mentorship and alumni networks in building meaningful and successful careers.



4:15 PM -5:30 PM

JASON GARCIA

FOUNDER AND MANAGING
PARTNER
THE HIGHER LAW FIRM LLC

Jason Lee Garcia is a Chicago-born attorney and founder of The Higher Law Firm LLC, where he advises cannabis operators, investors, and management teams on regulatory and transactional matters. Since beginning his practice in 2019, he has represented craft growers, transport license holders, and multi-entity management groups in negotiations, compliance strategy, corporate structuring, and governance disputes. His work focuses on building disciplined legal frameworks that support sustainable growth in highly regulated industries.

A proud alumnus of Northeastern Illinois University, Jason is committed to expanding Black and Brown representation in cannabis and emerging markets. He centers his practice on increasing ownership, leadership access, and long-term wealth creation for underrepresented entrepreneurs, using cannabis law as a platform for inclusive economic development.

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MARIA FLORES

**FOUNDER AND MANAGING
DIRECTOR
EXCELLZIA LLC**

Maria Barajas Flores is the Founder and Managing Director of Excellzia LLC, a business process outsourcing firm that provides finance, accounting, and operational support to startups and growing organizations. A proud alumna of Northeastern Illinois University, she brings a strong foundation in leadership and business operations, with experience leading teams in fast-paced, large-scale operational environments prior to launching Excellzia.

Alongside her professional work, Maria remains deeply engaged in community-based initiatives supporting marginalized communities through outreach, advocacy, and resource coordination. Her work reflects a commitment to building sustainable businesses while advancing equity, access, and opportunity through both enterprise and community leadership.

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AMANDA ROSSI
SOFTWARE ENGINEER
CAPITAL ONE

Amanda Rossi is a software engineer at Capital One, working on the Card Acquisitions Credit Decisions team. She supports three core backend services that power how credit card applications are evaluated and processed. Her work focuses on maintaining and improving backend systems, resolving production issues, addressing security vulnerabilities, performing system upgrades, and monitoring logs and database queries to troubleshoot and validate system performance.

Amanda began her career as an intern at Discover during college and transitioned into a full-time engineering role, continuing with the team through Capital One's acquisition. While in school, she was actively involved in the Google Developers Student Club, CBT Student Advisory Council, and Computer Science Society, where she enjoyed mentoring peers and supporting the growth of the tech community within the university.

Funding Smarter, Structuring Better: Modern Strategies for Business Growth

This session focuses on smarter funding approaches and effective business structuring to drive sustainable growth in today's competitive market. The discussion will explore capital access, financial planning, investment readiness, and strategic decision-making, offering practical insights for entrepreneurs and business leaders looking to scale and strengthen their organizations.



5:40 PM - 6:55 PM

MARK FERGUSON

DEPUTY DISTRICT DIRECTOR
ILLINOIS DISTRICT OFFICE, U.S.
SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

Mark Ferguson is the Deputy District Director for the Illinois District Office of the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA). With over 35 years of experience, he oversees the implementation of SBA programs and initiatives that support small business growth across Illinois, with a strong focus on access to capital, entrepreneurship, and economic development. He also supports district goals through outreach initiatives, special events, and strategic partnerships that benefit the small business community. In addition to his role at the SBA, Mr. Ferguson is an Adjunct Professor teaching finance and business-related courses and serves on several nonprofit boards. A mentor, minister, and community leader, he is passionate about leadership development and empowering entrepreneurs to transform their ideas into sustainable and successful businesses.

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5:40 PM - 6:55 PM

PERRAN WETZEL

PRESIDENT

PG WETZEL & ASSOCIATES, INC

Perran Wetzel is a tax strategist, AI innovation pioneer, and Founding Certification Partner with Sean Callagy and Unblinded. With over 50 years of business experience, he has helped clients save hundreds of thousands of dollars in taxes, built a client base of more than 2,000 individuals, and delivered hundreds of speaking engagements nationwide.

Recognized with honors including the Presidential Lifetime Service Award, the Distinguished Service Award from Luther College, and recognition from the Illinois Senate, Perran is known for blending deep human expertise with cutting-edge artificial intelligence. Rather than using AI as a simple tool, he is redefining professional services by teaching AI to think, diagnose, and serve—demonstrating that the future of wisdom-driven technology is already here.

Big Center Pitch Night

Big Center Pitch Night brings together innovative entrepreneurs who present their business ideas to a live audience and industry leaders. This session features pitches from **Tyris Manney of Tyris Manney Beauty, Ceira Pascal of Hair Therapy, and Mac Varilla of Chi Sports**, highlighting their ventures, market potential, and growth strategies while celebrating creativity and entrepreneurship.



7:05 PM - 8:20 PM

JESSICA MUELLER

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ADULT
EDUCATION, ADVANCEMENT, AND
BUSINESS INNOVATION
BIG CENTER

The Business Innovation & Growth (BIG) Center at Northeastern Illinois University supports entrepreneurs in turning ideas into sustainable, growth-ready ventures. Located within the College of Business and Technology, the BIG Center offers a collaborative environment where innovators receive expert guidance, mentorship, and practical tools to develop and scale their businesses.

Through hands-on coaching, educational programs, and strong connections to Chicago's entrepreneurial ecosystem, the BIG Center supports ventures from early ideation to expansion. Its mission is to foster innovation, promote inclusive economic development, and empower entrepreneurs to create lasting impact in their communities.