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DECEMBER / JANUARY 2020

Northwest Indiana Business Magazine

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and North Central Indiana
and surrounding counties*

People first mentality

*E-Day honorees find taking care of workers
ultimately leads to positive business results*

Michael Schrage
Chairman and CEO
Centier Bank



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10 IMPRESSIVE E-DAY WINNERS



26 WORKPLACE WELLNESS

NORTHWEST INDIANA BUSINESS MAGAZINE

DECEMBER / JANUARY 2020

CONTENTS

6 BUSINESS NEWS Around the Region

Learn about the people and companies making a difference at work and in their communities

10 ENTREPRENEURSHIP People first attitude

E-Day winners find taking care of workers ultimately leads to positive business results

22 ACCOUNTING A fresh look at numbers

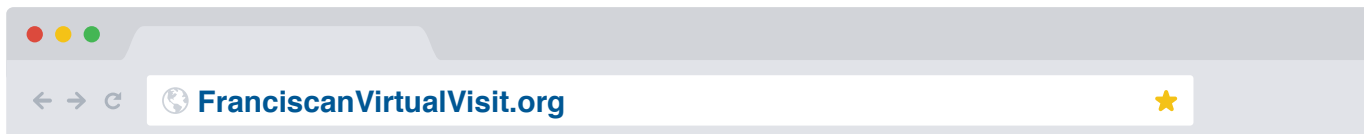
Accounting firms guide clients toward better business decisions with data analytics

26 WELLNESS Sound mind and body

Experts suggest communication best strategy to preserve workers' overall health

30 SUCCESSION PLANNING Leadership potential

Ability to listen on top of list of qualities organizations now seek in new leaders



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40 NATURAL WONDERS



42 GOOD FOR THE BODY

34 WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT **Guidance for entrepreneurs**

*Region resources plentiful for people
who want to go into business for themselves*

38 LEADER PROFILE **Advocate for children**

*State Board of Education welcomes charter teacher
whose personal experience led to her life's passion*

40 MAKING A DIFFERENCE **Legacy of environmental trust**

*Mission of Shirley Heinze Land Trust
stays true to vision of organization's founder*

42 OFF HOURS **Outdoor adventure awaits**

*Food Bank executive and family get lost in moment
while discovering majesty of natural environment*

44 VIEWPOINT **Better workforce essential**

*Designation as 21st Century Talent Region
means Northwest Indiana on right path*



DEC-JAN 2020

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► Cover photo of Michael Schrage by Michelle Hamstra.

GOOD BIT

2,600

The acreage protected across Lake, Porter, La Porte, St. Joseph, Starke and Marshall counties by the Shirley Heinze Land Trust.

Read more about the organization on page 40.

IN THIS ISSUE

This year marked the beginning of a new decade, but no one ever imagined what 2020 would bring. A global pandemic, which cooled the global economy. Businesses everywhere fought for their survival, and in Northwest Indiana, this year's Entrepreneurial Excellence (E-Day) Award winners innovated and found ways to keep their doors open. When business owners needed guidance, they turned to specialists, including accountants, who are providing data analysis services to help clients improve operations. The changing environment created emotional hardships, but people sought help from health professionals to cope. There was no stopping daily business activity with many organizations welcoming new leaders and making plans for future transitions. People wanting to launch their own companies tapped resources across Northwest Indiana to ensure they followed a good path. An organization dedicated to preserving natural habitats persevered through the crisis, and in times of stress, a Region executive finds a hike through the great outdoors is the best escape. I hope you enjoy this issue, and thank you for reading Northwest Indiana Business Magazine.

— Larry Avila, managing editor

PICTURE PERFECT



Photo by Doug Ross

This 1967 Ford Mustang sold at auction for \$8,100, auctioneer Jonathan Kraft said. The car had trees growing through it when it was picked up in Wanatah. The new owner will have to spend tens of thousands of dollars to restore it. Learn more about Kraft on **Page 10**.

QUOTE TO REMEMBER

“We can go faster alone, but we can certainly go further together.”

— Heather Ennis, president and CEO, Northwest Indiana Forum
Story on page 10

LEADER PROFILE



JESSICA CANTARELLI

Who she is: Jessica Cantarelli, public relations and communications manager at Centier Bank

Where she calls home: Schererville

What's best about NWI: The mom-and-pops, and longstanding independently owned businesses

What she's reading: "Untamed," by Glennon Doyle

Favorite music: Synth pop, soft rock, indie/alt rock

Favorite movie: "American Graffiti"

Favorite food: I am the self-proclaimed Pizza Princess of Chicago

Favorite saying: "A person's a person, no matter how small." Dr. Seuss, "Horton Hears a Who"

AROUND THE REGION



Learn about people, companies making difference at work and in their communities

LARRY AVILA

Accounting

Megan Applegate, CPA and partner with the firm **Applegate & Co. CPAs** in Michigan City, was recently among the keynote speakers at the annual **Not-For-Profit Conference** sponsored by the **Indiana CPA Society**. Her presentation was viewed by more than 100 conference participants, and included an in-depth discussion on presenting complex financial information and ensuring sound corporate governance practices within not-for-profit organizations.

Banking

Muncie-based **First Merchants Bank** in late September announced that **Michael Rechin**, who has served as president and CEO the past 13 years, is retiring Dec. 31. He will remain on the bank's board of directors and will serve as an adviser. **Mark Hardwick**, now chief operating officer and chief financial officer, will succeed Rechin as CEO. The bank also named **Michael Stewart**, current chief banking officer, president, while **Michele Kawiecki**, current senior vice president of finance, will become chief financial officer. All leadership changes are effective Jan. 1. **Jadira**

Hoptry recently was named director of community lending and development.

Merrillville-based **Centier Bank** promoted **Marija Radiceska**, mortgage loan officer, to officer of the bank, and named **Lydia Post** assistant vice president of small business banking for Porter and La Porte counties.

Business

Chester Inc. in Valparaiso, an architectural, construction, technology and agricultural systems company, hired **Trent Haldeman** as a client development specialist and **Mike Radjenovic** as an architectural designer.

Economic Development

Bethany Hartley is the new chief strategy officer for the **South Bend-Elkhart Regional Partnership**.

Jerry Chavez, who had served as president and CEO of the **Marshall County Economic Development Corp.** since spring 2014, resigned from the post in late September to take another job out of state.

Education

Craig Teetsel is the new vice president for finance at the **University of Saint Francis**, which has campuses in Fort Wayne and Crown Point. He will be

part of the cabinet for college president the **Rev. Dr. Eric Albert Zimmer**.

Sunghee Kim was named university organist at **Valparaiso University** and assistant professor of church music and organ. Kim has served as visiting assistant professor of music and interim university organist at the college the past three years.

Theresa Kessler, the Kreft Endowed Chair for the Advancement of Nursing Science and professor of nursing at **Valparaiso University**, has been named a fellow in the **American Academy of Nursing**.

J. T. Forbes, CEO of the **IU Alumni Association**, will temporarily oversee the **IU Foundation** until the university finds a permanent replacement for the organization's retiring leader **Dan Smith**.

Dr. Sue Ellspermann, president of Ivy Tech Community College, recently joined the Presidents Forum Governing Board, an organization composed of presidents of higher education institutions, foundations and academic support organizations, dedicated to the continuous reinvention of higher education. The forum is an association of 17 college and university presidents and chancellors representing 3 million students.



ACCOUNTING
Megan Applegate



BANKING
Michael Rechin



BANKING
Jadira Hoptry



BANKING
Marija Radiceska



BANKING
Lydia Post

Gaming

Kathryn Jenkins is the new senior vice president and general manager at **Horseshoe Casino Hammond**.

Health care

Bill Higbie, president and CEO of the **Porter County Community Foundation**, recently was appointed to the board of trustees for **Northwest Health - Porter** in Valparaiso.

Franciscan Health recently welcomed **Dr. Sonia Sharma**, family medicine and obesity medicine, **Hammond Clinic**.

Community Healthcare System recently welcomed these physicians to the **Community Care Network Inc.**: **Dr. Carlos Gonzalez**, general surgeon; **Dr. Ilona Carlos**, obstetrician and gynecologist; **Dr. Alison Petrovich**, internal medicine; **Dr. Alok Patel**, neurocritical care; **Dr. Sherman Chen**, vascular neurologist; **Dr. Kevin Alexander**, podiatrist; and **Dr. Sharon Harig**, pulmonologist.

Dr. Ippei Takagi, neurosurgeon, joined the practice of **Dr. Jonathan Hobbs** on the **Northwest Health - Porter** campus in Valparaiso.

Hospitality

Jon Hunsberger is the new executive director of the **Elkhart County Convention & Visitors Bureau**. He replaces **Diana Lawson**, who is retiring as CEO of the organization on Dec. 31.

Insurance

Bridget Holt joined the **Healy Group** in South Bend as a personal account manager in the company's insurance division.



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
Bethany Hartley

Law

Attorney **Layne Marino**, who specializes in franchise law, joined the law firm of **Burke Costanza & Carberry** in Merrillville.

Media

Merrillville-based **Lakeshore Public Media** recently was presented with the **Cardinal Community Service Award** from the **Indiana Broadcasters Association**. The award recognized the organization's work to engage in live conversation with community leaders, political figures and law enforcement to discuss events related to the protests in the wake of the death of George Floyd in Minnesota. Lakeshore PBS aired a program, "Race and Justice: Here and Now," a one-hour live special hosted by **Michael Puente**, Northwest Indiana bureau reporter for **WBEZ** and host of "Off Mic" on **Lakeshore Public Radio**.

Nonprofit

Alisa Hecimovich, vice president at **American Precision Inc.** in Gary, was selected as the Lake County representative to the **Ivy Tech Foundation** board of directors.

News

Indiana Face Mask in Rensselaer and **Custom Cut Door LLC** in Elkhart were among 20 statewide recipients receiving a share of \$2 million in **Manufacturing Readiness Grants**. The program was announced by **Gov. Eric Holcomb** in May as part of the **Economic Activity Stabilization and Enhancement** program designed to stimulate manufacturing investments in Indiana.



EDUCATION
Craig Teetsel



EDUCATION
J. T. Forbes

Northern Tool + Equipment, a Minnesota-based supplier of high-quality tools and equipment, opened a new location at 8205 Broadway in Merrillville in October, which employs 20 people. It is the retailer's fourth Indiana location.

Developers of the **Rauner Family Veteran Apartments**, established by **A Safe Haven Foundation**, a \$20 million, 75-unit apartment housing project for low-income, senior and disabled veterans, broke ground in Hobart in late August. Former Illinois **Gov. Bruce Rauner** and his wife, **Diana**, gifted \$1 million to A Safe Haven Foundation to support the project, which is expected to open by spring 2021.

The **Indiana Economic Development Corp.** announced in late August that Elkhart-based **Marson International**, a tube fabrication firm, plans to invest \$2 million in its plant at 3230 Magnum Drive to install new equipment, increase production and improve operational efficiencies. The move is expected to create up to 25 new jobs by the end of 2023, the state said.

The transformation of **Franciscan Health's** former Michigan City hospital site began in November. System officials expect work on the renovated Homer Street campus to be completed by fall 2021. Work includes demolition of structures built before 1986. The remaining facilities will be remodeled and used for new Franciscan services, including behavioral health, drug and alcohol treatment, healthy and nutritious foods, and elder care services.

Tom & Ed's Autobody, which operates locations in Schererville, Merrillville, Crown Point, Burns Harbor and Cedar Lake, acquired four



EDUCATION
Dan Smith

east-central Indiana body shop locations in Anderson, Pendelton, New Castle and Greenfield operated by **Riley & Son's**. The Riley & Son's name will be retained.

The **University of Saint Francis** is expanding its Crown Point campus. The college broke ground on the \$7 million building addition in late September. The college said the project will add 19,000 square feet of academic space to its current operation at 12800 Mississippi Parkway and



GAMING
Kathryn Jenkins

will double the university's footprint in Crown Point.

Purdue University Northwest opened a new research center in Hammond in September to help students explore new innovations for manufacturing. The **David Roberts Center for Innovation and Design** is on Indianapolis Boulevard, a few blocks west of the PNW Hammond campus.

Chicago-based **Midwest Truck & Auto Parts** announced in late September plans to move into a



HEALTH CARE
Bill Higbie

125,000-square-foot facility at the **AmeriPlex** at the **Crossroads Business Park** in Merrillville. The new facility gives the company operational efficiencies to meet growing demand. Midwest plans to be fully operational in Indiana in 2021. The facility will employ up to 150 people by the end of 2024, according to the **Indiana Economic Development Corp.**

Jeff and Robyn Walsworth, operators of **Firehouse Subs** shops at 71 Silhavy Road in Valparaiso and 6536



HEALTH CARE
Sonia Sharma

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HEALTH CARE
Kevin Alexander

U.S. Highway 6 in Portage, were one of seven **Axe Award** recipients recognized by Firehouse of America for 2020. There are more than 500 Firehouse Subs franchisees in the U.S. The award recognizes high-performing franchisees throughout the Firehouse Subs system and their commitment to the community.

Porter, La Porte and Starke hospitals, and their affiliated physician and medical offices, will operate under the name **Northwest Health**. In a Sept. 30 announcement, health



HEALTH CARE
Sharon Harig

system representatives said Northwest Health combines the resources of the Porter, La Porte and Starke hospitals “in a comprehensive system of in-person and telehealth services in more than 30 primary and specialty locations across the (Region).”

Aquagenics Technologies of Naperville, Illinois, will spend \$10 million and bring as many as 100 new jobs after it relocates its headquarters, research and development and manufacturing operations to



HOSPITALITY
Jon Hunsberger



LAW
Layne Marino

the former 530,000-square-foot Joy Manufacturing site on Woodland Avenue in Michigan City, according to the **Economic Development Corp. Michigan City, IN**. The company expected to close on the property and begin moving its operations to Michigan City before the end of 2020.

Merrillville-based **Centier Bank** broke ground in early October on a new branch at 9621 Wicker Ave. in St. John, which is expected to open in late spring. ■

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PEOPLE FIRST ATTITUDE

E-DAY WINNERS FIND TAKING CARE OF WORKERS ULTIMATELY LEADS TO POSITIVE BUSINESS RESULTS

DOUG ROSS

The 2020 E-Day honorees have something in common. Each entrepreneur has successfully responded to change.

The awards are given annually by the Indiana Small Business Development Center's Northwest Indiana office. Lorri Feldt, regional director for the agency's Northwest Indiana office, said she was impressed by this year's winners.

Small Business Person of the Year

Dina and Damon Gasaway were working at Winn Machine, a machine shop in La Porte, about 30 years ago when they met and eventually married. Today the couple own the company.

Many parts they produce are used in the air compressor and food processing industries.

The industry has evolved along with technology, the Gasaways said. Now

Winn Machine uses all CNC — computer numerical control — machines for greater precision in cutting and grinding.

"The part price doesn't move a whole bunch" compared to years ago, Damon said, but machine prices have risen.

The Gasaways are involved in all levels of the operation. They're often in the shop, talking with customers and involved in sales. Some machine shops struggle because the owners don't do

much on the floor to see what employees are going through, Damon said.

Dina said it's important to value the input and opinions of the employees doing the work.

Treating them well includes more than just paying a good wage. It also means allowing them to explore other job options within the company, Damon said. Someone sweeping the floor can work their way up to other jobs.

Another way the company treats its employees well is providing free haircuts on the first Thursday of the month. That's a safety issue, so the workers' hair doesn't get caught in machinery, but it also is a workplace benefit.

Damon's dedication also sets the company apart, Dina said. "He never says no to a customer."

When a customer asked one Friday afternoon for a specific part by Monday morning, it wasn't possible because Winn Machine didn't have the raw material it needed for the job. But the part was ready by Monday afternoon, Damon said.

"We run kind of lean on the shop side," Damon said, so the shop tries to make enough parts in a run to last a year. It then warehouses the spare parts for when the customer needs them.

"We're really responsive to our customers too," he said.

Customers usually receive an answer by the end of the day, but they try to do so within an hour.

Family-Owned Business of the Year

Jonathan Kraft's father, Conrad, started the family business, Kraft Auction Service, in 1976.

"Ever since I was itty-bitty, that's all I've ever done was the auction business," Jonathan Kraft said.

Running the Valparaiso-based business wasn't his plan, though.

"I'll do great things in the business world, but I'll help you out," he said.

Then, at age 18, he went to auction school for seven days to prepare for the auction exam.

"It kind of struck home then," he said. "I've always looked at it from what my parents did."

Then, from his dorm room at Purdue University, he transformed the business.

The company had picked up a pair of vases for a 30th anniversary sale that Kraft had posted online. When he saw a \$2,000 bid for them, he knew something was up. Kraft did some research and found the vases were highly collectible. They were made in Boston in the 1850s. The vases sold for \$18,700 for the pair.

"I just turned 20 at the time," Kraft said. "Everyone there thought I was some type of genius."

That auction sold \$60,000 in merchandise. "We went out for steak dinners," he said.

But that amount pales in comparison to auctions conducted by Kraft today.

In 2020, an eight-day auction brought in \$5.1 million, Kraft said. A 2016 auction for a large farm sold \$6.7 million worth of items.

The auction business is as fast paced as the auctioneer's voice at a sale. The business ships out between 200 and 300 packages weekly.

"We ship a pretty fair amount to Australia," Kraft said.

Kraft has a real estate branch and another for benefit auctions for special events.

The auction service most people think of deals with personal property of all kinds, including estate sales and business liquidations. Often, the auction house is seen as the bad guy, Kraft said. Someone in the family doesn't want to see mom and dad's possessions go, or a business owner is upset about failing and seeing all the hard work go down the drain.

The advantage, though, is that the auction house employees clean out the building quickly once the family takes the most sentimental items.



"(Ignite the Region is) helping the ecosystem for business to grow and flourish. This has been a strong playbook."

— Heather Ennis
President and CEO
Northwest Indiana Forum

2020 E-DAY HONOREES

**SMALL BUSINESS
PERSON OF THE YEAR**

**Damon & Dina
Gasaway**

**FAMILY-OWNED
BUSINESS OF THE YEAR**
Jonathan Kraft

**EMERGING SMALL
BUSINESS OF THE YEAR**
**Joel and Amy
Bender**

**WOMEN-OWNED
BUSINESS OF THE YEAR**
Sandy Smith

**SMALL BUSINESS
ADVOCATE OF THE YEAR**
Heather Ennis

**MINORITY SMALL BUSINESS
PERSON OF THE YEAR**
Paulette Hill

**ENTREPRENEURIAL
SUCCESS AWARD**
Stephen P. Arndt

**SMALL BUSINESS
JOURNALIST**
**James A.
Muhammad**

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD
**Michael
Schrage**



Dina and Damon Gasaway met at Winn Machine about 30 years ago and now own the business. Here, they stand in front of one of the early machines, a Bridgeport mill.

Photo by Doug Ross

“They call us; we take care of everything,” Kraft said.

“We’ve never found a dead body,” he said, but there have been all sorts of surprises, “from the dirty and nasty to coins and gold.”

Repeat business is a rarity; however, referrals have built the business to what it is today.

“We sell literally everything,” Kraft said. “We sell history.”

Emerging Small Business of the Year

Joel and Amy Bender’s puzzles and games shop, Mind Benders, in downtown Whiting was presented with a puzzle of its own when the shop was shut down because of the pandemic.









Joel convinced the Lake County Health Department that the products were important to residents’ mental health. The challenge was how to safely get products to customers.

Complicating matters even more was Mind Benders’ longstanding practice of product demonstrations to show people how their games were played.



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Joel turned himself into a store exhibit, demonstrating games in the shop window so people could safely observe.

Sales went online but not the way you might think. Joel would text the customer four or five photos, then have a table in the doorway of the store with a Square card reader to limit physical contact.

"Give me a call when you're half a block away," he would say to customers, and he would bring the merchandise out and put it in their back seat or trunk.

"Joel is literally running bags down the street," Amy said. "We work with the customers and how they want to be handled."

Curbside delivery is far from the only way Mind Benders goes outside the store to reach potential customers.


Whether it's at the lakefront park or a school literacy night, Mind Benders is out in the community. Game night at the Mascot Hall of Fame was a hit too.

A hopscotch event in front of downtown businesses this year proved popular as well.



Photo by Doug Ross

This Confederate pistol is expected to bring \$10,000 to \$15,000 at auction, Jonathan Kraft said. His father, Conrad, started the family business, Kraft Auction Service, in 1976.



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Photo provided by Professional Information Systems

Paulette Hill is owner of Hobart-based Professional Information Systems. In 1992, she opened Professional Information Services as a sole proprietorship operating from a small desk in her dining room. Now she has five employees in Hobart.

"When you give back to the community, the community gives back to you," Joel said.

He advises shoppers to check out local Little League or football fields to see who advertises. Those are the businesses putting money back into the community not big online stores, he said.

Mind Benders' target customers run the gamut from children to the elderly.

Marketing to older adults came when Joel and Amy realized children's parents wanted the grandparents to remain sharp. The store carries a selection of jigsaw puzzles with larger pieces for consumers with dementia.

Succeeding in business requires a lot of time. "You've got to market yourself," Amy said. And because you're spending so much time at work, "you've got to have passion about what you do," Amy said.

Listen to your customers too. Talking with them helps you understand what they're thinking, the couple said.

At Mind Benders, part of the sales process is giving shoppers a hands-on

experience with products, which is difficult to do virtually.

Putting brain riddles on Facebook really has helped the store keep shoppers' attention, though, Joel said.

Business owners should do their own work online too, including taking advantage of the resources for small businesses.

"Boy, did we sit down and talk through every angle of inventory and marketing and everything," Amy said, to be better prepared the day the store opened.

Women-Owned Business of the Year

Sandra Smith has operated SAN Corp., a trucking business serving the construction industry for 24 years.

The Crown Point-based company began with just two trucks and now has a fleet of 15 vehicles and brokers additional trucks as needed to serve the Northwest Indiana and Northeast Illinois areas.

To help her in the "very competitive" industry, she gained certification as a Disadvantaged Business Enterprise and Women's Business Enterprise.

"It's really a man's world," she said. "You have to really make sure your rates are good."

Smith would rather her trucks travel safely than fast. Paperwork, however, should zoom.

"I'm a big stickler on paperwork," she said. Her drivers know that. The advantage is that by invoicing the customer quickly, she's able to quickly pay brokers.

"My turnaround is quick," Smith said. "We email a lot more. Thank goodness for technology."

People might think roadwork would be a problem for truckers, but not for SAN Corp. Construction is what keeps the company's trucks moving.

Besides moving materials, the company has flatbed trucks to transport equipment.

Smith finds keeping drivers happy means treating them well. This means having cookouts and occasionally serving them mostaccioli.

Believe in yourself, she advised. Set high expectations and never settle.

Small Business Advocate of the Year

Northwest Indiana Forum President and CEO Heather Ennis carries a torch for the small business community.

Specifically, she makes sure the organization's Ignite the Region program is working as it should.

The program focuses on business development and marketing, entrepreneurship and innovation, infrastructure, talent and place making. Economic development partners throughout Lake, Porter, La Porte, Starke, Newton, Jasper and Pulaski counties collaborate on the initiative.

Ennis is responsible for ensuring everyone completes assigned tasks for the plan so it can go from strategy in development to implementation.

"It's sometimes challenging to get everybody on the same page," Ennis said.

However, it seems to be working. Ignite the Region is a five-year plan, begun two years ago. She said about 88% of the plan is either completed or in progress.

"It's helping the ecosystem for business to grow and flourish," Ennis said. "This has been a strong playbook."



Sandra Smith is president/CEO of SAN Corp. The Crown Point-based company began with just two trucks and now has a fleet of 15 vehicles and brokers additional trucks as needed.

A photograph of a woman with glasses and a pink sweater working on a laptop. The laptop screen shows a video conference with several participants. Overlaid on the image is the text 'Securing Your Remote Workforce' in large blue letters. Below the text are five icons with labels: 'consult' (handshake icon), 'implement' (gears icon), 'manage' (laptop icon), 'protect' (lock icon), and 'support' (headset icon).

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James Muhammad, president and CEO of Lakeshore Public Media in Merrillville, joined the PBS affiliate in 2013. Since then, he has restructured the organization.

One of the lessons Ennis has learned is the power of collaboration.

"We can go faster alone, but we can certainly go further together," she said.

It is important to listen to critics with valid concerns to best determine how to overcome hurdles, Ennis said.

For Ignite the Region, she wanted everyone in the community to have a seat at the table — organizations that have been in the same family for generations and startups as well. Small, entrepreneurial businesses should be represented alongside larger businesses. All of these affect some aspect of business, Ennis said.

Minority Small Business Person of the Year

Paulette Hill, president and CEO of Hobart-based Professional Information Systems, said when she went to college at age 18 to pursue a computer science degree, it took her a while to notice she was one of the few women in the class.

In 1992, she opened Professional Information Services as a sole

Provided by James Muhammad



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proprietorship operating from a small desk in her dining room. Now she has five employees in Hobart.

"Our goal is to continually expand our knowledge base and stay on top of new market trends," Hill said.

Getting the right certifications adds tools to her toolbox, she said.

So does focusing on what she calls the three T's: truth, transparency and trust.

She says honesty eventually yields dividends.

"Tell them everything; you earn their trust," Hill said. "You lose that, you lose their business."

There also are times clients are told what they don't want to hear, especially when asking for something that cannot be done.

However, being honest and effectively laying out why a request cannot be fulfilled can soften the blow, Hill said. This can sometimes lead to gaining a loyal customer.

"Failure isn't an option with us," she said. "We always try to find a path going forward."

Entrepreneurial Success Award

Job-Site Safety began as a company focusing on safety services to the rail industry. Now the Michigan City-based company offers a broader range of services to additional industries, including the power industry.

President Steve Arndt said the company deals with safety for overhead transmission lines.

Arndt attributes the company's success to hiring the right people for the job.

A proprietary recruiting and hiring process, using videoconferencing years before the pandemic made it essential for other businesses, has helped with the screening. Interviews of the top four or five finalists are routinely done via Skype or Zoom.

For the past five years, new office employees have been trained virtually. That enables quality training while reducing the costs to execute and track progress, Arndt said.

During the pandemic, the company began offering temperature checks and monitoring customers' sites to ensure safe practices in the COVID-19 era.

Job-Site Safety hired extra employees to do so.

"Be flexible in your business," Arndt said. Job-Site Safety has done so multiple times, expanding to include additional locations as well as additional services.

Small Business Journalist

James Muhammad, president and CEO of Lakeshore Public Media in Merrillville, has faced challenges and

achieved successes since he joined the PBS affiliate in 2013.

Among them has been restructuring the organization — right-sizing, he called it — to focus on developing stories about the Region in a memorable way. "Throwaway" content that people won't remember for long has been jettisoned, he said.

"On a television side, we're watched by all of Chicagoland," Muhammad said.

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Photo by Doug Ross

Steve Arndt, president of Job-Site Safety, shows a dummy used in training. Arndt attributes the Michigan City-based company's success to hiring the right people for the job. Arndt works with son Stephen S. Arndt and Justin LeBeau.

Lakeshore Public Media tells stories about Northwest Indiana to residents, but it also acts as a Region ambassador to the entire Chicago metro area.

The stories tell how Northwest Indiana is distinct from the rest of Chicago, giving a sense of place, but also about the quality of people here.

It is important for viewers to recognize the breadth of experiences individuals, businesses and organizations in Northwest Indiana offer, Muhammad said.

Most people view the Region as the home of blue-collar workers and steel mills, but there is so much more to the story, he said.

Creating relevant content that gets shared broadly is good for the Region's reputation. The content has gotten attention. PBS, WTTW and the PBS affiliate in Washington, D.C., have all shared content from Lakeshore.

"We want people wherever they may be to find quality stories from our Region," Muhammad said.

A show about Paul Henry's Art Gallery in Hammond was shared on social media by someone in Ohio who commented about the cross-generational collaboration.

"You know you're great, but it does mean something" when others notice it, Muhammad said.

The "Eye on the Arts" program has drawn attention too. It was nominated in the fall for a Chicago/Midwest Emmy Award for Outstanding Achievement for Arts/Entertainment Programming. The half-hour program highlights a diverse range of local artists, arts organizations, events and stories.

Lakeshore also operates a radio station, which offers local shows, including "Let's Eat With Chef Nick." That show gets around to a variety of

restaurants in the Region, giving them valuable exposure on the air.

In 2019, the TV station launched a new series called "Friends & Neighbors," focusing on people, places and things to do in the Region. Videos ranging between three and six minutes include historical segments, lifestyle segments, profiles of nonprofits, good Samaritans, local businesses and area landmarks.

Muhammad has learned a lot from it. He did not realize how much Valparaiso University's Chapel of the Resurrection had served the community or how popular shows on family farms would be.

Developing appropriate content takes effort.

"The first thing we focus on is a great story," Muhammad said. But production quality counts too. "We're competing in the third largest production market in the country."

Muhammad praised Lakeshore's partners. "I never accept (awards) solely on behalf of Lakeshore," he said. "We couldn't do anything we're doing without those partnerships here in the community."

Early in Muhammad's career, he said, a mentor told him, "You can achieve mediocrity solely by yourself, or you can achieve greatness with the collaboration of others."

Lifetime Achievement Award

Michael Schrage, chairman and CEO of Merrillville-based Centier Bank, has served personal and business banking customers for decades. Along the way, the privately owned bank has expanded its footprint across a broad swath of Indiana.

"There have been several challenges over my career," Schrage said. In the 1980s, the economic downturn especially hit hard in Northwest Indiana, with the steel industry restructuring and shedding thousands of employees in the process.

During the 1990s, he had a health scare. And 2020 saw the worst unemployment rate since the Great Depression almost a century ago.

"What kind of downturn will occur from this particular carnage on the overall economy and world?" he asked.

That remains to be seen.

But this year did accelerate growth in the banking industry's balance sheets, he said. The Payroll Protection Program added \$330 million to the balance sheet on the loan side, and much of it ended up on the deposit side, he said.

The pandemic accelerated the shift to digital banking practices, Schrage said.

He didn't foresee that happening early in his career, but he had other issues to focus on then.

Schrage's great-great grandfather Henry Schrage started the bank, then known as Bank of Whiting, in 1895. Mike Schrage was the heir apparent when he joined the bank in 1972.

"My younger life was always marked by that," Schrage said. "It made it extraordinarily difficult to prove myself in the banking business community, (and) it was a constant cloud over me in my early career to prove myself."

In the early 1970s, the banking business was all about size. "How big is your bank?" people would ask each other.

Schrage said his goal in the 1970s was to become the biggest bank in Lake County. That was an audacious goal at the time, because the Gary banks were 10 times the size of what is now known as Centier.


Today Centier has 64 offices, serving the Northwest Indiana, Michiana, Fort

Wayne and Indianapolis markets. It is the largest privately held bank in Indiana.

In 1973, the Whiting bank began a growth campaign to new communities. The board of directors decided to change the name to United Bank of whatever community it served, including United Bank of Whiting.

"I didn't care for it, but I wasn't in a position to change anything at that point," Schrage said.

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“My legacy will not be helping the bank grow, but the culture inculcated within everyone in the organization. It’s not a one-man show. You’ll hit peaks and valleys, but that’s to be expected. Anyone’s business or personal life is not a straight line.”

— Michael Schrage,
Chairman and CEO of Centier Bank

Later, a new board member asked during his second meeting, “Have you ever thought of changing the name of the bank?” “Yes,” Schrage recalled responding.

The bank went through an identification firm and came up with Centier Bank.

With the bank approaching its first century, century and premier were merged to create Centier. The name also pays tribute to Center Street, the bank’s first location, Schrage said.

“It was an interesting experience to launch it,” Schrage said. The bank announced the name change in print ads. The first day, people were pronouncing

it CENT-EE-AY, like Cartier, instead of CEN-TEER, he said.

That quickly was addressed with radio ads.

Schrage suggested business leaders surround themselves with as many talented people as possible.

When just starting out, an entrepreneur does everything. He said it is difficult to break that habit, but it is strategically important.

Recognize your strengths and identify areas where you can use help to complement your strengths, Schrage said.

“I think that’s where a lot of small businesses fall down and fail,” he said.

His next suggestion runs counter to what he believed when his career began. “Growth isn’t everything,” Schrage said.

He said it is important to not outrun your resources by trying to take advantage of every opportunity and realize your journey isn’t a straight line.

Develop a three- to five-year plan but realize it’s a rough outline, Schrage said.

“You’re going to be adjusting like a sailboat,” he said. “You tack one way, and you take the other because the wind shifts,” Schrage said.

Schrage advises business leaders to consider differentiation. Banking, especially today, is a commodity, he said. It is important to distinguish your company with a recognizable difference.

For Centier, that means the customer experience.

Centier treats employees well and instructs them to do the same for customers.

“We’re a lot smaller, more nimble” than big national banks, Schrage said.

Centier chooses employees based on how they would fit in with the company’s culture.

“We can teach them most of the banking skills out there, but we can’t undo their personality,” he said.

As a private bank, Centier doesn’t have to run its operations based on Wall Street whims.

“Here, our maximization is in the culture,” Schrage said.

The company continues to hammer home the message that it is family owned and operated, and not for sale. Publicly owned banks cannot say that.

The shift to a customer-centric culture stems from his health crisis in the 1990s, he said. He realized how important it was to treat people well, both customers and employees.

“My legacy will not be helping the bank grow, but the culture inculcated within everyone in the organization,” he said. “It’s not a one-man show. You’ll hit peaks and valleys, but that’s to be expected. Anyone’s business or personal life is not a straight line.”

The E-Day Class of 2020 was honored Nov. 12 at Avalon Manor in Hobart. The event has taken place for more than 25 years and attracts top business leaders throughout the Region. ■

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A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a maroon long-sleeved shirt and black pants, is sitting on a wooden counter. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. In the background, there is a motorcycle, a large potted plant, and a dark wooden cabinet. A white mug is on the counter to her right.

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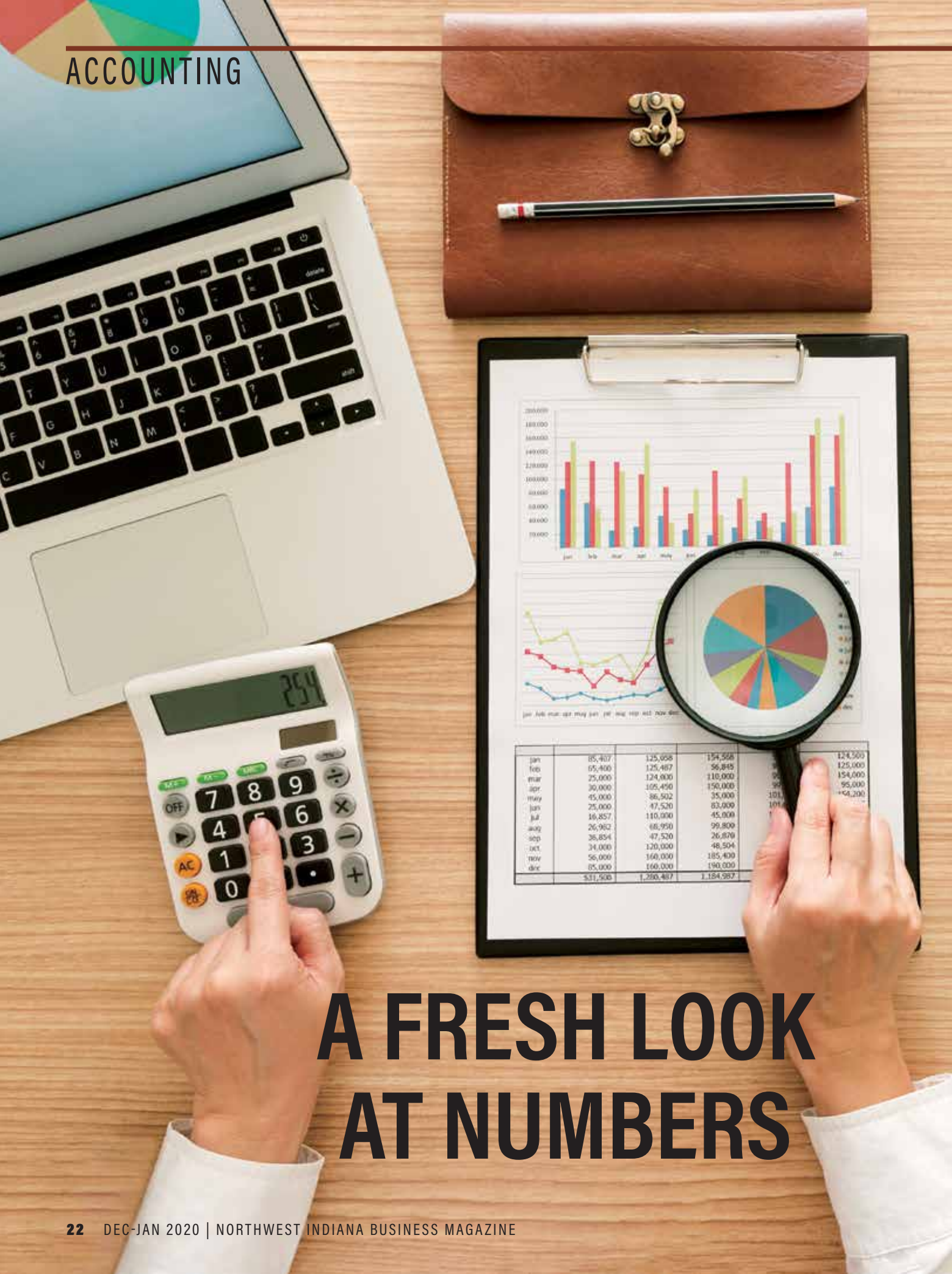
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A FRESH LOOK AT NUMBERS



jan	85,407	125,058	154,568	124,500
feb	65,400	125,487	56,845	125,000
mar	25,000	124,800	110,000	154,000
apr	30,000	105,450	150,000	95,000
may	45,000	86,502	35,000	101,000
jun	25,000	47,520	83,000	101,000
jul	18,857	110,000	45,000	
aug	26,982	68,950	99,800	
sep	36,854	47,520	26,879	
oct	34,000	120,000	48,504	
nov	56,000	160,000	185,400	
dec	85,000	160,000	190,000	
	531,500	1,390,487	1,184,987	



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ACCOUNTING FIRMS GUIDE CLIENTS TOWARD BETTER BUSINESS DECISIONS WITH DATA ANALYTICS

CARRIE NAPOLEON

Access to affordable technology has increased the opportunity for businesses of all sizes to use data-driven decision making to increase the bottom line.

The use of data analytics is shaping the way accounting firms inform their clients. They are transforming from businesses that “create numbers” to businesses that can better help their clients use those numbers to advance their productivity and profitability, according to Joel D. Cooper, a CPA with Munster-based McMahon & Associates CPAs P.C.

Cooper said affordable and widely used business software is transforming how firms like his provide services to their clients.

Gone are the days when clients would bring a stack of canceled checks and bills to a data entry clerk and their accounting firm. The clerk would enter the data, the accountant would process it and provide a report of the information generated to the client, a process that could take weeks, Cooper said.

Twenty years ago, no one would have imagined technology would evolve that process and create new business opportunities for accounting firms.

“The economy is changing, period, end of story,” Cooper said. “We will have to evolve with it.”

As technology improved, the role accountants play changed.

Today, most businesses employ accounting software, including QuickBooks, which automates the data entry process. Artificial intelligence links a business’s various accounts, vendors and customers, among other information and inputs the data almost instantaneously.

The access to data and the ability to generate a range of reports gives financial professionals the opportunity to discuss with their clients what they are hoping the information can achieve for them, Cooper said. They can then analyze that data in a way that generates the information the business owner needs.

“It all really just depends on what your business processes are, how you want to go about things,” Cooper said.

Reports can be generated that are as generalized or specific as needed. For example, Cooper said, analytics can help a widget manufacturer determine how many widgets it sells or manufactures during any time span, such as an hour, a week, a month or a year.

Through product coding, the use of analytics can determine if blue widgets sell better than red widgets. That information can help create predictive models that help a business owner plan for staffing needs, future growth and industry changes, Cooper said.

Useful numbers

Access to accurate industry-specific data also is improving, creating an opportunity for businesses to measure performance against industry standards. All the various data can be used to help a business owner plan a course of action.

Data collection is helpful today because so many businesses are no longer 9 to 5. Affordable credit card readers help small retailers and vendors at places such as farmers markets and festivals to increase sales and track information. That data then can be used to manage inventory purchases or when to target specific audiences.

Data can be as specific as how many apples were sold in a day and what impact those sales have on revenues, experts said. The data can help a business owner identify specifics such as products that might be driving down revenues even if overall revenues appear to be growing.

While the thought of analyzing data might be intimidating to some

business owners, it is becoming more commonplace.

Experts say examples of analytics abound in everyday life and are so integrated they might not even be noticed. The use of analytical data can be found in utility bills that break down a consumer’s usage by month and can help facilitate cost savings.

An online bank statement, which provides a tool showing what percent of someone’s money is spent on housing, utilities, food and other items is using analytics to provide data to guide consumers on budgeting. Shopper loyalty programs analyze each consumer’s shopping patterns to target specific coupons and sales encouraging return shopping trips.

Big corporations, such as Amazon, for example, have mastered analytics to create a shipping model that in many cases can deliver items to consumers the same day the order is placed. Retail giants Walmart and Dollar General order items for restocking as soon as an item is sold, keeping shelves full and storage rooms empty, according to financial experts.

Micah Pollak, associate professor of economics and director of the Center for Economic Education & Research in the Indiana University Northwest School of Business & Economics, said the changes brought about by the use of analytics in business is the next step in a natural evolution of how technology is employed.

At one point, products were made to order, then mass production came along, and customers were

able to walk into a store and buy what they needed. Now, through data generated by inventory tracking in stores and online sales, businesses are reaching



“Business analytics can help an owner confirm a gut feeling is correct or let them know if they were relying on incorrect assumptions.”

— Gregory Ward
CPA, Swartz, Retson
& Co. P.C.

> ACCOUNTING

their customers where they are at and when they are ready to buy.

"You can't just make it and put it on the shelf anymore," Pollak said.

The data helps these big corporations keep shelves filled while minimizing waste.

It helps them make decisions on sales and what products customers want to buy.

Data collection, once a labor-intensive process, has been refined and improved by big corporations through the decades. Technology advancements have made data collection easier and more accessible for small businesses too.

"Analytics means an opportunity to take advantage of things you may have missed in the past," Pollak said.

Cost-effective accounting software has increased access to the data for those who know how to assess and manipulate it. Some businesses will embrace the thinking and the information while others who do not will be left behind, he said.

Small businesses often do not have the staff to perform this type of data analysis, even if they are using business accounting software, Pollak said. That is when an accounting or financial professional can help businesses assess the data.

"Big businesses have been doing it for a long time," Pollak said. "Even mom-and-pops and smaller businesses are finding it more accessible."

Analytical tools are becoming readily available and easier to use.

Businesses can use analytical data provided by Facebook and other social media platforms to target ads to certain demographics such as age, income and location, for better response, according to the experts. They are then able to use the data to track the success of an advertising campaign.

New possibilities

Gregory Ward, a CPA with Swartz, Retson & Co. P.C in Merrillville, said, as people become more comfortable with the tools to assess and process data, more businesses will begin using analytics.

"I think sometimes they don't realize the power of tools they already have like Microsoft Excel and Adobe Acrobat," Ward said.

Using those programs, a person can scan in a document and convert it into a spreadsheet with minimal effort. Then the data can be analyzed very easily, he said.

That data can then be used to help a business refocus its efforts and initiate change, if and when needed. The data can help keep a business on track and identify areas where improvements can be made, Ward said.

"It can help them better target customers, change staffing patterns and identify inefficient activities," Ward said.

All businesses can benefit from analyzing their data in more detail,



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and today's software can help make that happen, he said.

"Business analytics can help an owner confirm a gut feeling is correct or let them know if they were relying on incorrect assumptions," Ward said.

As businesses move more of their processes from paper to electronic format, there will be more data points collected that can be used to guide decision making.

Cooper agrees all businesses can benefit from a better analysis of their own data, but there is no single solution for everyone. How analytical data is collected is as different as each individual company.

Businesses must first accurately capture the data they want to compare to get accurate results from the analysis, Cooper said.

Consulting with a financial professional on what data is needed and how it will be interpreted makes a difference in the outcome.

"Analytics is only as good as the data," he said.

Technology and the advancement of programming is making it possible for companies of all sizes to access analytical data, Cooper said.

Those companies need to make sure they understand the numbers being generated to ensure the decisions they make will help and not hurt their businesses.

Smaller businesses often do not have the staffing to break down that information, a service trickling down to the accounting and financial world, Cooper said.

Pollak said the use of analytics is becoming more and more prevalent and is growing in the academic sector.

The next generation of students to graduate school in accounting and economics will have a better grasp of the role analytics play, Pollak said. More courses are being offered on the subject, and it is now a degree program as well, he said.

Cooper said analytics is being taught more as its role in the business world grows. Those businesses that want to benefit need to tap staff or firms who can help them analyze the increasing amount of data at their fingertips. ■



"Analytics means an opportunity to take advantage of things you may have missed in the past."

— Micah Pollak

Director of the Center for Economic Education
& Research in the Indiana University Northwest
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SOUND MIND AND

EXPERTS SUGGEST COMMUNICATION BEST STRATEGY TO PRESERVE WORK

HANNAH REED

Experts say sometimes the first step to having good mental health simply is to talk to someone.

Communication often is among the most important factors in beginning a path toward positive well-being, said Sharon Kraus, the president of mental health services at the Merrillville-based Regional Mental Health Center.

to be OK," Kraus said. "We have to give them permission to let us know how they're really feeling, and if they do have personal matters that are somehow interfering with their ability to concentrate or focus, supervisors need to be aware of those things and to help if we can with accommodations."

In recent years, companies have changed how they approach workplace

different courses to promote mindfulness and wellness.

"A lot of organizations are doing (all) sort(s) of webinars or seminars to kind of teach people how to decompress, to manage all of these new things that are going on in your workplace, in your life," said Danita Johnson Hughes, president and CEO of Edgewater Health in Gary. "It's giving them some strategies about how to take a break."

31% This many U.S. adults were struggling with anxiety and depression, according to a June survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Mental health affects everything, Kraus said, and workers and their respective employers can reduce the stigma surrounding mental health by opening a dialogue with each other.

"As supervisors, I think we have to let our subordinates know that it's OK not

wellness, and have found different ways to preserve and promote overall good employee health.

Some companies have provided employees with increased mental health benefits, including access to therapists or other specialists, or have explored

Prepared for the shift

While employee mental health has been a growth topic amid the novel coronavirus pandemic, Tom Kunst, CEO of United Healthcare of Illinois and Northwest Indiana, said health plans were evolving before the crisis began.

Kunst said that, in recent years, more employers have recognized the connection between mental health and



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BODY

KERS' OVERALL HEALTH

total health and have made changes to accommodate.

"More and more employers and health plans are wanting to make sure that there's access points for mental health," Kunst said. "We've been expanding our network of mental health providers over the last several years, making sure that consumers have access to it."

As conversations about mental health and resources for employees have increased, the pandemic has driven employers to escalate their offerings to accommodate heightened demand for services.

The abrupt change from an office setting surrounded by coworkers to online meetings alone at a kitchen table turned desk has drastically changed the work day for many employed people. Companies have responded to those alterations using various approaches.

With that in mind, Kraus said it is important to also consider employees' overall well-being when not working in a traditional collaborative workplace.

"Mental health is an important part of everyone's overall health and well-being," Kraus said. "It affects the way we think, we feel, we act, how we handle stress, how we make decisions at work and at home."

New approach

Rex Mudge, president of the Society of Human Resource Management of Northwest Indiana, said being alone while working all day can take a toll on employees. There are many small things people are missing, including office birthday parties or social gatherings.

"When you're working remotely, you don't have those celebrations, you don't have those gatherings, and that's one small artifact that people are sort of missing," Mudge said. "That coupled with separations from working with others, seeing colleagues laid off or furloughed, seeing neighbors being unemployed, it all adds to this ongoing unresolved grief, which will certainly affect your mental health and productivity."

Coping with the changing working environment has led to increased use of telehealth, or the delivery of health care, education and services using remote technologies, Mudge said.

"Perhaps there are some stigmas that are associated with mental health, and maybe folks weren't comfortable going into a doctor's office, that now with telehealth, it's really kind of opened up a new channel for folks to access mental health care," he said. "We've seen, in terms of the utilization of telemental health, it's really kind of exploded since (the pandemic) started."

Kraus also has seen an increase in the use of telehealth services because of the pandemic; however, whether

it continues depends on how insurers and Indiana Medicaid respond.

"They've been great during the pandemic, with all sorts of liberalization of telehealth rules and telehealth reimbursement," Kraus said. "I'm hoping that will continue after the pandemic."

Kraus said telehealth is not a new concept, but it was an underutilized resource until the pandemic.

The Regional Mental Health Center now actively promotes telehealth services, and a growing number of consumers are taking advantage of remote consultations.

Regional outpatient therapy is almost exclusively telehealth, Kraus said, and clients have responded positively about the convenience.

Kraus said, with telehealth, clients are less likely to skip appointments because of the ease of use.

Melanie Johnson, the director of acute intensive services at Porter-Starke Services in Valparaiso, said her facilities and staff also have experienced increased telehealth usage.

"It works out with a lot of people's schedules," Johnson said. "With a lot of people working at home, they can slice out portions of their day to see their providers, and it helps a lot with transportation barriers as well ... it's removed quite a few barriers."



"As supervisors, I think we have to let our subordinates know that it's OK not to be OK. We have to give them permission to let us know how they're really feeling."

— Sharon Kraus
Regional Mental
Health Center

Path to good well-being

Mudge said many organizations have responded to the growing need for mental health care through numerous approaches, including virtual meditation programs for employees or providing time off. In an environment where many professionals continue to work remotely, businesses have allowed their workers to be flexible with their time.

"Some of the things I've seen, there's one particular employer locally who is offering their employees to take two



Provided by Danita Johnson Hughes

Danita Johnson Hughes, president and CEO of Edgewater Health in Gary, says people are struggling with the lack of contact with others while working from home.

hours of their daily routine during their day, and essentially (use that time) to enjoy the sunshine,” Mudge said. “They’re encouraging their employees to get more exposure to the daylight.”

Other companies have virtual happy hours or online meetings where they discuss things other than work, which allows employees to feel more connected to each other, Mudge said.

The use of employee assistance programs has increased, too, Mudge said, noting employees can go online to seek help.

“More EAP programs are offering additional webinars (and) videos on alleviating stress,” he said. “They’re offering more advice on what it’s like to work remotely and how to stay connected.”

Hughes said struggling with a lack of contact with coworkers is not easy, and the isolation that has accompanied the pandemic has had severe effects on the mental health of many people, especially those who are working.

In a June survey, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

reported 31% of U.S. adults were struggling with anxiety and depression, while 13% said they started or increased substance abuse and 11% said they seriously considered suicide.

In the same period in 2019, results for symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder had decreased, the report indicated.

“Things like the social distancing, people feeling isolated, those kinds of things always increase stress and anxiety among people in general,” Hughes said. “For people who have to work, it’s really challenging for them to try to cope with stress in a healthy way, considering all the responsibilities that they have — their work, home, if they have children, if they’re taking

care of older family members, parents or anything like that — it’s very stressful.”

Hughes said employers should be proactive and continue to consider the mental and physical health of their employees.

“You’re the employer, but we can’t open our doors now or in the future if our

“Sometimes you have to not work at home, not even virtually. Don’t work at home, don’t contact anybody at work, (and) if the building is not burning down, take a break.”

— Danita Johnson Hughes, President and CEO, Edgewater Health

employees are not healthy, so what can we do to make (employee) life less stressful?” Hughes asked.

Know when to unplug

Aside from companies taking steps to increase health plan coverages and encouraging use of telehealth services, Hughes said people also can be proactive in improving how they feel.

To assist with the feelings of stress that accompany the day, Hughes said people can do yoga, meditate, practice healthy sleeping habits or take time away from screens.

It is also important for employees to take breaks and rest when needed, Hughes said, and for employers to understand and allow it.

“Sometimes you have to not work at home, not even virtually,” Hughes said. “Don’t work at home, don’t contact anybody at work, (and) if the building is not burning down, take a break.”

Hughes said people should spend time with family or others they care about.

“Watch a good show on television ... do something that takes your mind off of what’s going on every day,” Hughes said.

Mudge agrees discovering a healthy work-life balance is important, especially now, while people work from home, and there is a lack of separation between home and office life.

“(There are people) who feel that since they can access their work 24/7 then they need to be accessible 24/7,” Mudge said. “That sort of mentality leads to additional stress and potentially even job burnout with the notion that ‘I have access to my work 24 hours a day seven days a week, so then I should be available 24 hours a day seven days a week.’”

Hughes said employers face an ongoing battle to increase productivity of employees, while also seeking effective strategies to reduce stress and burnout.

She noted keeping communication open and clear, and providing support for both mental and physical health will make employees more willing to work and be productive.

“Understanding is really important, because sometimes in leadership positions, we’re just all about the work (and) getting the work done,” she said. “People come first.” ■



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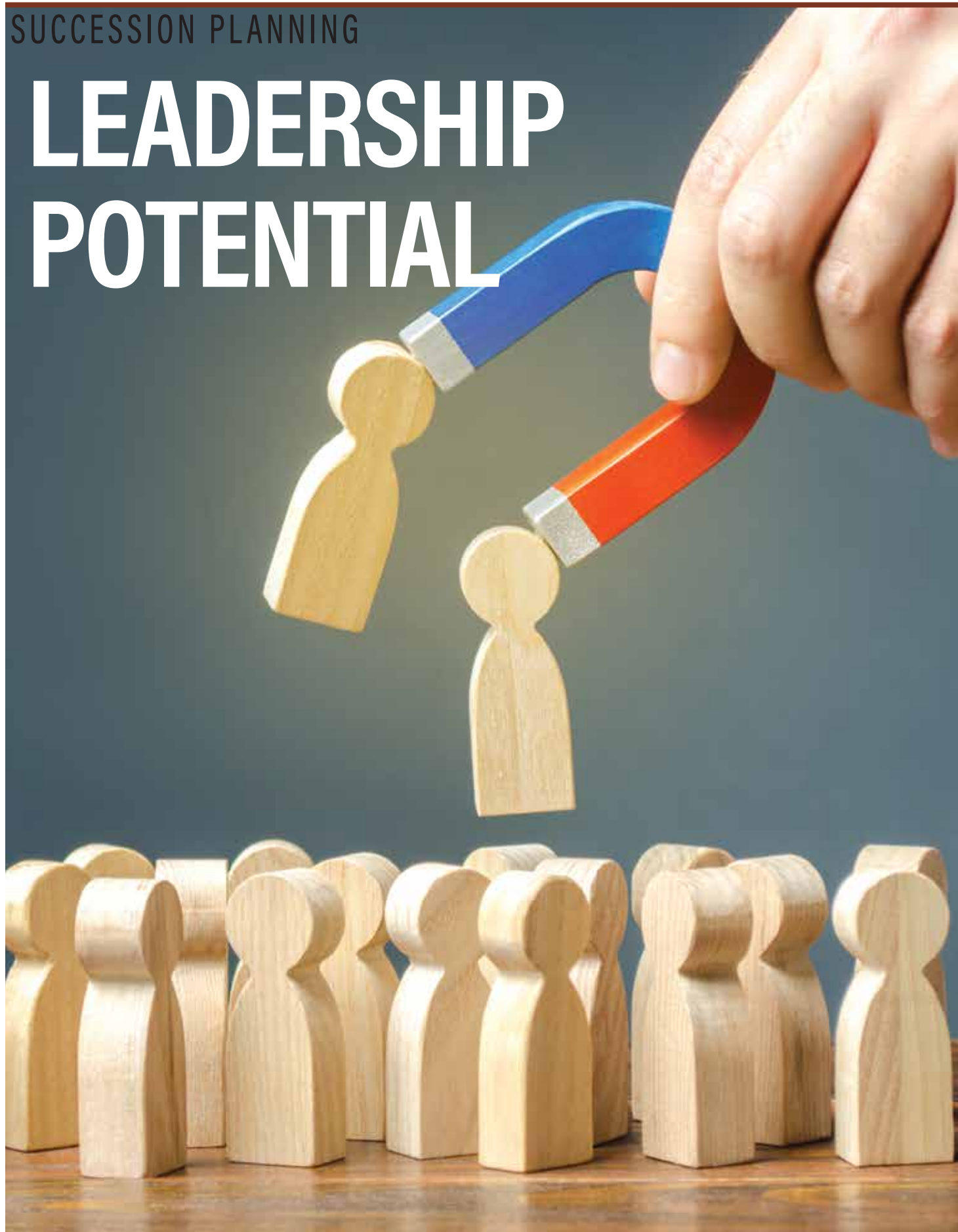
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SUCCESSION PLANNING

LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL





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ABILITY TO LISTEN ON TOP OF LIST OF QUALITIES ORGANIZATIONS NOW SEEK IN NEW LEADERS

CHRISTOPHER ADAM

When it comes to succession planning, the task can prove daunting especially for an organization that has enjoyed prosperity under stable leadership for decades.

For some organizations, the pandemic presented new challenges and opportunities for already established leaders. For others, it was a time of unique transition in appointing new leadership during an unprecedented time.

Some entities followed established plans of succession, while others saw an opportunity to find a different path under new leadership.

Talent pipeline

For more than 13 years, Michael Rechin has led First Merchants Bank during a period of significant growth and success. But the president and CEO will retire from his position Dec. 31. Rechin will remain on the First Merchants Board of Directors and will serve as an adviser to the bank going forward.

His retirement will come with a restructuring of top management. Mark Hardwick, current COO and CFO, will succeed Rechin as CEO, and Michael Stewart, chief banking officer, who will become president. Michele Kawiecki, senior vice president of finance, will become CFO. All leadership changes are effective Jan. 1.

"First Merchants works to have a strong talent pipeline and leaders in place to move up within the organization," said Charles Schalliol, chairman of the Muncie-based bank's board of directors. "These leadership moves are great examples of the successful programs we have in place to groom people, which are the most important assets to First Merchants."

Schalliol said the board of directors meets annually to discuss succession planning and review internal candidates who show strong potential for upward mobility.

"We value promoting from within because we know these leaders are good organizational fits," Schalliol said. "I like to say people both outside and inside the organization have development needs,

(but) with those outside, we do not know what they are."

Schalliol said First Merchants, which operates 130 banking offices, including 18 in Northwest Indiana and Northeast Illinois, also has a pipeline in place to grow young talent. It hires recent college graduates who show leadership potential.

"We want to hire younger people who will be good fits for a much larger organization, which we aspire to in the next decade," Schalliol said. "We look for strong candidates with an interest in banking and an interest in the role banking institutions play in our communities."

First Merchants Corp. is a financial holding company with headquarters in Muncie, Indiana. The corporation has one full-service banking charter, First Merchants Bank. The bank also operates as First Merchants Private Wealth Advisors (a division of First Merchants Bank).

Nature and nurture

Attorney James Jorgensen has spent his entire 45-year career with Hoeppner, Wagner & Evans, a Valparaiso-based law firm. Jorgensen, who has been recognized by his peers as a top leader in Northwest Indiana, said a good leader is a great listener.

"The leader is humble enough to genuinely care about the opinions of those he or she leads," Jorgensen said. "A good listener hears what is said, how it is said and what could be said but isn't."

He said a leader processes what is heard, not having to agree with it — at least in whole.

"Regardless of the outcome, there is great value in just the process," Jorgensen said.

Jorgensen has observed another common trait among strong leaders. They often surround themselves with

great people and empower them to be their best.

He said leadership is probably a combination of nature and nurture.

"Nurture-wise, a good leader gives others an opportunity to lead and to learn from mistakes," Jorgensen said. "This requires the leader to be patient in increasingly impatient times, (and) the best way to learn to lead is to be given the opportunity to actually lead and to learn from it."

Change in leadership

Even before the pandemic, the processes for choosing new leadership and the qualities sought in those leaders had changed.

"Some of the characteristics that we looked for when selecting leaders in decades past are no longer considered as important in new leaders today, particularly when we consider technical skills," said Cynthia Roberts, dean of the School

of Business and Economics at Indiana University Northwest. "For a long time, hiring committees and organizations looked for leadership candidates who had certain credentials, voiced confidence that they had all the answers, and were ready to come in and tell direct reports what to do."

The world is just too complicated for that to be a successful approach, she said.

"That has transitioned over time to the value being placed on a candidate who expresses the desire to come in, listen more than they talk and consider other perspectives," Roberts said.

Roberts said she was impressed by a candidate who said they planned to "hit the

ground listening." She said this approach is particularly relevant as many organizations have put a priority on building diverse and inclusive work environments.

Roberts was part of the process IUN underwent in the recent hiring of a new



"We value promoting from within because we know these leaders are good organizational fits."

— Charles Schalliol
First Merchants Bank



“Leadership seems to be a muscle that needs to be worked to get stronger and more nimble. ... Good leaders create an intentional culture of respect, of inclusion and of genuine connection to the people they lead.”

— Sheila Brillson Matias, Executive director, Leadership Institute and the Society of Innovators at Purdue University Northwest



“The leader is humble enough to genuinely care about the opinions of those he or she leads. A good listener hears what is said, how it is said and what could be said but isn’t.”

— James Jorgensen,
Attorney, Hoepfner, Wagner & Evans

chancellor. She said the multi-tiered approach used by the university helped ensure a variety of voices and perspectives played a part in the hiring process.

“We had a robust committee representing people from different levels, departments and campuses involved in interviewing the candidates,” said Roberts, who specializes in leadership development. “Hopefully, this process helps select a candidate (who) works for all, and because many had a voice in the

process, it is more likely that the new leader will be accepted.”

When Roberts took the dean position, she said she spent the first several months listening to everyone in the school.

“A true leader does not just come into a new position with their own plan and ready to take everything in a new direction,” Roberts said. “Instead, you come in and listen to those who are there to understand the history and then develop a strategy collaboratively based on that.”



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Leadership research

The Leadership Institute at Purdue University Northwest is a hub for leadership development in Northwest Indiana. The institute offers research-based leadership development programs for regional business leaders in every sector, as well as university staff and students and youth across the regional community.

“We help leaders identify areas of growth with time to intentionally practice their skills,” said Sheila Brillson Matias, executive director of the Leadership Institute and the Society of Innovators at Purdue Northwest. “Our goal is that each participant will become a more authentic leader poised and ready to be a community contributor who will help assure the Region’s vitality and quality of life in an increasingly competitive global environment.”

Matias said the Society of Innovators and the Leadership Institute work closely and share common ideals.

“I like to say that you have to be innovative to be an effective leader, and you need well-honed leadership skills to be an effective innovator,” Matias said. “The purpose of the Society of Innovators at Purdue Northwest is to work collaboratively with the community to drive economic and community development in Northwest Indiana through the power of innovation.”

Matias also serves as president of the La Porte County Commission. As a former public-school teacher, two-term councilwoman and two-term mayor of Michigan City, Matias is a practitioner of leadership and works closely with experts in the field.

“Leadership seems to be a muscle that needs to be worked to get stronger and more nimble — it involves listening, evaluating, inspiring, developing trust and creating genuine connections between people,” Matias said. “Good leaders create an intentional culture of respect, of inclusion and of genuine connection to the people they lead.”

Matias said leader development is personal development, and that as a leader grows in self-knowledge, adaptability, self-confidence and responsibility, he or she becomes a better leader and a better person overall.

“That’s the great news, because the reward for your hard work can be

experienced in all dimensions of your life,” Matias said. “This growth will affect multiple domains — your work life, your home life and your community life, making you more effective in each area.”

Brand passion

In the midst of the pandemic, University of Saint Francis underwent a major leadership change. Leaders at the institution, which has campuses in Fort Wayne and Crown Point, appointed the Rev. Dr. Eric Albert Zimmer as the new president. He succeeded Sister M. Elise Kriss, who retired in June after serving 27 years in the post.

“We had been praying for quite some time for the right individual to lead us during uncertain times,” said Sister Angela Mellady, provincial superior for the Sisters of St. Francis of Perpetual Adoration, who assisted with the search. “Father Zimmer’s experience and passion for higher education seemed to be a good fit, (and) it was quite a new experience for us to select someone other than a sister to lead the institution.”

Zimmer was appointed by the founding congregation, the Sisters of St. Francis of Perpetual Adoration, working closely with the USF board of trustees. Zimmer previously served in the Mendoza College of Business at the University of Notre Dame as well as pastor of Saint Patrick’s Church in Walkerton.

“I come in at a time when many universities, especially private, are challenged by demographic shifts and questions about their reasons for existence,” Zimmer said. “As a leader, I want to reaffirm our commitment to student-centered education in the Catholic tradition.”

Zimmer previously worked in higher education at Creighton University, Georgetown University and the University of Washington. He said a priority will be the continued development of the USF brand.

“We are a place of transformational education for the whole person,” Zimmer said. “At the end of their program, we want a student to be better prepared for life and living a fulfilling life in our society, (and) that means we need faculty and other leaders to be growing in the same direction as we embark on our strategic plan.” ■

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Guidance for entrepreneurs

Region resources plentiful for people who want to go into business for themselves

LAUREN CAGGIANO

Clint Powell wanted to be his own boss but quickly discovered there was more involved in starting a business than he thought.

His goal came closer to reality after connecting with a Region branch of SCORE, a partner organization of the Small Business Administration. It is staffed by volunteer counselors who provide free consulting services to entrepreneurs.

“SCORE was an invaluable asset in starting (my) company and even more now,” said Powell of Dyer, who launched Mechanic-Direct in September, a mobile

achieved without help as Powell learned. He was relieved it was unnecessary to go it alone and appreciated SCORE, which provided a mentor relationship rather than making decisions for his business.

“My mentor continues to be an active support member of (my) business and had many important points for starting (my) business that I had not previously heard of,” Powell said. SCORE helped him fine-tune his business plan and worked on financial projections.

“The great thing is that he let it be mine and offered suggestions but in no way tried to sway the business model,” said Powell, an experienced mechanic

30 volunteers serve clients across Northwest Indiana.

“Part of what we offer is mentoring (at no cost,” he said. “But what we like to say is that it’s not free because there is a cost of the person’s time, (so) in other words, for us to be most effective, our clients have to do a lot of work, show up at meetings and give up their time.”

On the part of the mentor, Pelka said they follow a code of ethics, which guides their approach.

“We try to be empathetic, helpful and educational,” he said.

Beyond the one-on-one engagement, Pelka said counselors offer no- or low-cost business training on a variety of business topics, including marketing, finance and accounting, management, and other topics.

With respect to mentoring, Pelka said SCORE has helped entrepreneurs find success across various industries. Through the years, Pelka has seen wins that include clients adding staff and expanding product or service lines.

For mentors who become invested in the client’s outcome, they derive a great deal of fulfillment from these relationships, Pelka said.

That’s why at SCORE, the group measures its success by clients’ satisfaction.

Pelka said it is not always easy to quantify certain wins, though client feedback is one way to gauge the efficacy of the SCORE program.

“In some ways, we could say, the national organization looks at the number of businesses or the number of jobs that were created,” he said. “But sometimes it’s hard to determine those figures, but what we can measure is client sentiment.”

Shaping an entrepreneur’s mindset

Lawrence Hamer is the dean of Purdue University Northwest’s College of Business. From an academic perspective, Hamer said his institution



IU Northwest School of Business and Economics students review economic data to conduct a company analysis.

Provided by Indiana University Northwest

business. It provides an assortment of vehicle repair services.

SCORE, an SBA partner, is among an array of resources, from higher learning institutions to public-private partnerships. They are available for startups and existing businesses seeking advice to get an idea off the ground or help a company grow.

Experts say there are many paths to entrepreneurship, but seldom is success

and certified master automotive technician. His company operates in Dyer, St. John and Schererville.

Providing guidance

SCORE has provided education and mentorship to more than 11 million entrepreneurs across the county since 1964.

Donald Pelka of Valparaiso is vice chair of the Region’s chapter. About



READ ON PHONE

provides a well-rounded education when it comes to the study and execution of business practices.

“So, in the College of Business at Purdue Northwest, we have an undergraduate degree in management, which allows for students to specialize in different areas that we call concentrations,” he said. “For instance, we have a concentration in entrepreneurship.”

The business curriculum marries the theoretical with the application, and that’s by design.

“We don’t want to be a program where all the education comes from the classroom,” Hamer said. “Instead, we went with a program where students are interactive and undertake activities that are very dynamic and involve them going outside of the classroom as part of their education.”

Hamer said the university leverages resources in the Region, which provide real-world experiences to students as well as to other stakeholders. One example, he said, is that PNW offers support to people in the community who are trying to get ventures off the ground. That helps foster an environment for entrepreneurship.

“I feel there is an undercurrent of entrepreneurship activity in the Region,” he said. “And I think the future of the Region is much more dependent on entrepreneurship than it has been in the past.”

Encouraging startups

Economic development underscores the work PNW does on campus. A September 2018 report from the Northwest Indiana Economic Forum titled “IGNITE the Region: A Regional Strategy for Economic Transformation” cements this idea. The strategy provides an evaluation of Northwest Indiana’s economic development challenges and opportunities, informed by quantitative analysis, qualitative input, and the consulting team’s 20-plus years of experience working with communities across the country.

The report’s findings suggest that “creating a robust entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystem is vital to the long-term health of the Northwest



Clint Powell launched Mechanic-Direct in September, a mobile business that provides an assortment of vehicle repair services.

Provided by Clint Powell

Indiana economy. Regions can no longer base their economic development programs exclusively on recruiting large manufacturing plants, corporate headquarters or distribution facilities.”

The report’s authors make the case, noting regions that prioritize the infrastructure necessary for entrepreneurship to flourish, are better positioned to thrive economically.

Hamer said Purdue Northwest is answering that call.

“And so, at Purdue Northwest, what we’re trying to do is be a resource to the Region by offering this program, which is dependent on drawing together some of the infrastructure that’s related to

entrepreneurship,” he said. “And we do that to offer students a way to let their entrepreneur dreams come to life and learn how to do that, and then go back out into the Region and practice those skills.”

‘Good for the community’

Often what’s good for students is good for the business community. Rajan Selladurai is an Indiana University Northwest School of Business and Economics professor and director of the IU Northwest Small Business Institute.

Selladurai has one foot in the academic world and the other in business, a benefit for both sides.



“I feel there is an undercurrent of entrepreneurship activity in the Region. And I think the future of the Region is much more dependent on entrepreneurship than it has been in the past.”

— Lawrence Hamer

Dean of Purdue University Northwest's College of Business



“What makes us unique, though, is that our limited partners — they are organizations particularly in the state of Indiana — are interested in seeing Indiana's startup ecosystem grow.”

— Jacob Schpok

Vice president of entrepreneurial services, Elevate Ventures



“We collaborate with local small businesses and companies, and provide consulting services for them on a semester-by-semester basis.”

— Rajan Selladurai

Director of the IU Northwest Small Business Institute



“SCORE was an invaluable asset in starting (my) company and even more now. ... My mentor continues to be an active support member of (my) business.”

— Clint Powell

Owner, Mechanic-Direct

As the director of the institute, he has seen the power of public-private collaboration and its impact on the Region.

The SBI provides customized consulting services to businesses and other organizations in Northwest Indiana and the Chicago metro area. Student teams, under his guidance, work closely with the client organizations on several different projects, including developing industry analysis, company analysis, and customized solutions and recommendations to challenges and problems.

“We collaborate with local small businesses and companies, and provide consulting services for them on a semester-by-semester basis,” Selladurai said. “Some of the companies that we have worked with and helped over the years include a local Chick-fil-A franchise.”

Selladurai said the students enjoyed this project, because it challenged them to translate classroom concepts into action. In that case, they helped the restaurateur better market a menu item with various tactics.

Another success in the same industry, Selladurai said student teams made the case to administration — through feasibility studies — to bring two Starbucks locations to campus.

And more recently, IUN students attracted interest from health care. Just before the pandemic hit, they signed on to work with two hospitals in the Region to help improve teamwork in their systems. Although the project has been temporarily delayed, Selladurai is confident they will resume the collaboration in the spring.

Support for entrepreneurs

Indianapolis-based Elevate Ventures has an interest in the state's entrepreneurship ecosystem.

Jacob Schpok, vice president of entrepreneurial services and entrepreneur-in-residence, said his firm's difference is in the details.

“We operate like a traditional venture capital firm, where we look for opportunities to invest in (companies), and our limited partners expect to get a return on our investment by taking an equity

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position in these businesses,” Schpok said. “What makes us unique, though, is that our limited partners — they are organizations particularly in the state of Indiana — are interested in seeing Indiana’s startup ecosystem grow. So, we only invest in Indiana-based companies.”

When making these decisions, Schpok said it is viewed through the lens of offering solutions.

“Often, we look for businesses that are addressing total addressable markets that are national or global in scope,” he said. “So that often means that their market cap is, at a minimum, half a billion dollars, so these are visionary game-changing business models, but they’re across a number of different verticals.”

Schpok’s group may work with life sciences startups, such as pharmaceuticals or medical devices.

“We also look at opportunities within verticals, like companies in agriculture and manufacturing,” he said.

That investment can take the form of both capital and programmatic support, he said. His organization assists entrepreneurs who might be interested in starting a company but not yet ready to start raising capital.

“So, we’ll continue to work with them and get them pointed in the direction where they become as attractive as possible for institutional investment dollars,” he said.

“We have entrepreneurs-in-residence across the state, working one-on-one with startups.”

Schpok’s group tends to make matches based on the geographic location but considers the entrepreneur’s vertical. Meaning, if an entrepreneur has a life sciences solution, it makes sense to place them with someone who understands the ins and outs of that industry, he said.

To understand the scope and scale of their work, Schpok said his group has assisted 3,000 companies in Indiana since 2010. That’s more than \$100 million in investment.

There’s also opportunity for engagement outside of these venues.

According to Schpok, his group traditionally had a statewide pitch

competition. The idea is leaders from Hoosier-based startups present their concepts for a shot at an investment.

A series of workshops provide another way to engage, Schpok said. Kinetic is an annual conference, which brings together panelists of entrepreneurs who have been successful in scaling their operations.

During the program, entrepreneurs discuss their early steps to launch ideas,

or in some cases, what they had to do to exit a venture. Whatever the situation, Schpok said he’s always impressed by the caliber of ideas.

What separates entrepreneurs from others is a certain drive, he said.

“It’s having that growth mindset where you want to really put energy towards solving a problem, and that’s a prerequisite to becoming an entrepreneur,” Schpok said. ■

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LEADER PROFILE

Advocate for children

State Board of Education welcomes charter teacher whose personal experience led to her life's passion

PHILIP POTEMPA

Erika Dilosa believes her love for a challenge drives her career success in teaching and the education field. “I had several favorite teachers, who I remember and love, but there is one teacher, Mr. Rhodes, my fifth-grade English language arts teacher, who really stands out in my mind,” said Dilosa, director of special education at 21st Century Charter School in Gary.

“Our class had been assigned to write and deliver a speech explaining something our peers probably didn’t know about,” she said. “I selected Albert Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, but when I started to dive into it, I realized it was much more difficult to understand than I thought, (so) when I tried to change my topic, Mr. Rhodes wouldn’t allow it.”

He told her no topic was too difficult for her.

“That motivated me like never before,” Dilosa said. “Not only did I deliver my speech for the class, he also had me deliver it to the entire school.”

Dilosa said that, years later, she returned to her alma mater West Aurora (Illinois) High School, where she graduated in 1996, to give a speech at the graduation ceremony.

Mr. Rhodes introduced her to the crowd by sharing her challenging speech presentation experience in fifth grade.

Dilosa, 42, is eager to join her peers from around the state to begin her new

career chapter. She said she is prepared to overcome any hurdles.

In July, Gov. Eric Holcomb announced Dilosa’s appointment to the Indiana State Board of Education. Besides work for 21st Century Charter School, she is also on staff at Gary Middle College East and West.

Dilosa represents the first congressional district and will serve a four-year term on the board.



“I view my appointment to the SBOE is an opportunity to remove some of the barriers that exist for children with special needs and which go unnoticed.”

— Erika Dilosa
Indiana State Board of Education

areas, I did research and decided to take my child to have an evaluation,” Dilosa said.

“When I received the results, they indicated he was on the spectrum of autism,” she said. “At the time, it seemed like everything I read indicated he would have a poor quality of life, (and) in an

A recent change to Indiana law required the governor’s next appointment to the board be a special education teacher or director. Dilosa’s appointment fills the seat previously held by Tony Walker.

“We are pleased to welcome Erika to the Board,” said B.J. Watts, state education board chair. “Her experience with special education, coupled with her passion for her community, will make her an excellent addition.”

Dilosa moved to Indiana after she married her husband, Brian, a church pastor, in 2001. She said her passion for working with students with special needs grew after learning her own child was on the autism spectrum.

“When I noticed my child was not developing at the rate of his peers in some

effort to give him the best education possible, I went back to school to become a special education teacher and fell in love with advocating for children and families.”

The couple have six children, between the ages of 9 and 18, all attending Lake Central School Corp. Dilosa said one of her goals as a board member is to connect and communicate with community leaders.

“I will reach out to other community stakeholders, hear what matters most to them, and work cooperatively with them to meet the needs of all children in Indiana,” she said.

Another goal is to be a voice for those who people do not understand.

“It is not easy having a disability, but it sure helps when those who are capable are understanding and willing to help those that have a disability,” Dilosa said.

Dilosa said her mother lost her ability to walk and required a wheelchair for her mobility.

“I remember feeling the world was only built for those who could walk,” Dilosa said. “There were several places my mom couldn’t access because of her disability.”

Her mom often felt discouraged leaving home because she felt she would not have the support necessary to accommodate her disability.

“I view my appointment to the SBOE is an opportunity to remove some of the barriers that exist for children with special needs and which go unnoticed,” Dilosa said.

Dilosa is a graduate of Chicago State University where she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in political science as a scholar athlete, and is a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc.

She continued her post-baccalaureate education at Indiana University where she earned a master’s degree in special education. ■



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MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Legacy of environmental trust

Mission of Shirley Heinze Land Trust stays true to vision of organization's founder



The Shirley Heinze Land Trust, with the leadership of Executive Director Kristopher Krouse, now manages and works to protect more than 2,600 acres of land across a six-county area in Northwest and North Central Indiana.

Photo provided by Shirley Heinze Land Trust

MICHAEL PUENTE

Dr. Shirley Heinze is buried in the tiny city of Young Harris in northern Georgia near the Chattahoochee National Forest.

That's more than 600 miles from her hometown of Ogden Dunes where her love of protecting the Indiana Dunes was born and developed.

The Oak Park, Illinois, native, and a prominent psychologist, devoted her free time to enjoying and studying the nature of the Dunes. Although Heinze died in 1978 at the age of 51 from lymphoma, her legacy of protecting the Dunes and nature lives on through the land trust, which bears her name.

"After her passing, friends of Shirley Heinze, Robert and Bette

Lou Seidner from Chicago, decided to leave \$30,000 in her memory," said Kristopher Krouse, executive director of the Valparaiso-based Shirley Heinze Land Trust. "And that's how the Shirley Heinze Land Trust got its start in 1981 with a mission of permanently protecting land and the southern Lake Michigan watershed."

In the early days, the land trust's board members would attend land sales to acquire property.

"They would pick up these vacant lots of ecologically significant land in Gary, mostly dune and swale habitat," Krouse said. "In Beverly Shores, it was the Great Marsh, which is land immediately adjacent to the Indiana Dunes National Park."

That process continued throughout the 1980s, he said. Land also would later be donated to the group.

Krouse said in the mid-1990s, the organization received a significant donation of Berkshire Hathaway stock, which provided the financial resources to hire an executive director, purchase larger tracts of ecologically significant property and venture into land management.

By the 2000s, the land trust began partnering with other nonprofits, including the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, and municipalities offering environmental education programs.

Today, the land trust protects everything from small vacant lots to its



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largest parcel, the 520-acre Ambler Flatwoods east of Michigan City.

"People don't realize that, although there's a lot of fragmentation with our landscape, this is one of the most biodiverse places in the country," said Krause, who has served as director since 2005. "What we're doing is going out and protecting the biodiversity that we have left in this Region."

There are many unique plants at the Lydick Bog near South Bend.

"It's one of the last remaining bogs in Indiana where you find pitcher plants that are like actually carnivorous plants that eat bugs," Krause said.

Krause said the land trust has been spared significant fallout from the global pandemic. He said the trust's supporters and its diverse income streams allow it to operate during down economic times.

"I think that speaks to our diversification," Krause said. But the group must be diligent in monitoring its expenses.

"A lot of the programming we typically do, like bus tours and in-person workshops, have been limited and

have affected our ability to engage at the highest level," Krause said. "But I think we have done a good job as an organization of pivoting and doing our best in having more virtual activities."

The work of the land trust has received national recognition. In October 2018, the Washington, D.C.-based Land Trust Alliance, a national land conservation organization, recognized the Shirley Heinze Land Trust along with three other groups with its National Excellence Award.

"There are many ways to make a difference," said Andrew Bowman, LTA president. "The work of Shirley Heinze Land Trust helps large populations of the underserved and conserves a vast spectrum of biodiversity."



"We currently have protected over 2,600 acres and geography that now includes six counties."

— Kristopher Krouse
Executive director
Shirley Heinze Land Trust

Jim Haniford is a volunteer site steward at Meadowbrook Nature Preserve in Porter County, which is managed by the land trust. He walks the trails, noting any downed trees and picks up trash.

"I monitor the birds that I see (because) the beauty and the diversity of the wildlife is what attracts me," Haniford said. "... Hiking is my favorite thing, (and) that's why volunteering is so much fun."

Next year marks the 40th anniversary of the land trust.

"We're really proud of how far we've come," Krause said. "We currently have protected over 2,600 acres and geography that now includes six counties: Lake, Porter, La Porte, St. Joseph, Starke and Marshall Counties, (and) we continue to innovate as an organization." ■

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Outdoor adventure awaits

Food Bank executive and family get lost in moment while discovering majesty of natural environment



Victor and Monica Garcia hike Mount Healy, Alaska, with their children, Gabby and Dario.

Photo provided by Victor Garcia

CATHERINE MCCOY

In a state of perpetual change and uncertainty, professionals across the country have sought ways to maintain normalcy and peace in their lives as well as escape the noise of everyday life.

Victor Garcia, CEO of the Food Bank of Northwest Indiana, and his wife, Monica, have found that solace in the outdoors. From exploring the highest peaks of Alaska to trudging through the Arizona Hot Springs, or climbing to the top of the Rockies to roaming the trails of the Indiana Dunes, these hiking, camping and cycling adventures have been an integral part of their marriage for years.

“Going on a hike allows you to experience parts of our environment that not everyone sees,” Victor Garcia said. “The payoff of the views is second to none, (and) it’s a great reminder to slow down and pay attention to the now.”

The Garcias began taking camping trips during their first year of marriage. Several years and two kids later, the couple has logged numerous hiking excursions together, and now most family vacations include hikes, runs, rafting and cycling.

Victor Garcia said his love for nature was embedded in him at a young age.

“I’ve been camping since I was a kid,” he said. “My parents were avid campers

(who) loved taking long weekends to get away to various state parks and enjoy being outdoors, (and now) my wife and I have continued the love for outdoor activity with our own children.”

Exploring new landscapes might be intimidating but can be an opportunity to challenge fears and push comfort boundaries. Victor Garcia’s aversion to heights does not stop him and his wife from reaching mountain tops for the reward of an incredible view.

“I have complete trust in (Monica’s) ability to find unique trails with majestic views,” Victoria Garcia said. “Having a fear of heights, she knows how to help me push past my self-imposed limits.”

The Garcias said one of their favorite trips was to the Flattop Mountain trail in Anchorage, Alaska.

They described it as unlike anything they have ever seen.

"The beauty and majesty of the mountains in Alaska took my breath away," Victor Garcia said. "Mount Healy and Flattop Mountain provided views that I had never experienced before in my life, (and) the eerie stillness of being engulfed in the clouds while standing at the top of a trail brings a sense of calm."

Majestic mountain trails aside, Monica Garcia said there are gorgeous nature preserves closer to home. Traveling to national parks around the country is a great goal, but it is also important to recognize the nearby surroundings people often take for granted.

She said taking a walk in the great outdoors can be good for the body. It allows for numerous physical benefits, fresh air and reaching new heights.

Beyond that, spending time in nature allows people to unplug from a busy and distracted world, and offers time with those they love, Monica Garcia said. Hiking is an opportunity to be present and focus on what is in front of us now.

"Hiking isn't all about mountains and backpacking, although it certainly can be," she said. "There are some fun hikes right in our own backyard."

Monica Garcia said that, during the first few months of the pandemic, she rediscovered several trails throughout the Indiana Dunes.

"Sometimes we're so busy thinking about what's bigger and better out there that we take our own natural resources for granted," she said.

Victor Garcia said blazing new trails and standing at the base of a mountain, which you are preparing to ascend, might be a daunting task, but the uphill trek is something most are capable of. It is worth pursuing.

He often relates hiking to life's journey.

"You start off on one path but many times you need to course correct to get to the right destination," Victor Garcia said. "The most important thing is to keep taking one step forward." ■



"Going on a hike allows you to experience parts of our environment that not everyone see. ... It's a great reminder to slow down and pay attention to the now."

— Victor Garcia

CEO of the Food Bank of Northwest Indiana



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Winners profiled in the April/May 2021 edition.

VIEWPOINT



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Better workforce essential

Designation as 21st Century Talent Region means Northwest Indiana on right path

Avital and robust region possesses several attributes. They may include good housing and educational systems, abundant recreational options, environmental beauty, thriving businesses, a solid record of inclusivity and equity for all, access to transportation, innovation and entrepreneurial spirit, and a reasonable cost of living.

Additionally, a vital and robust region shows consistent population growth, offers good wages, and sees upward trends in educational attainment rates.

With strong enthusiasm, work began on the IGNITE Talent Pillar by researching issues important to inclusive development. Business partners looked at issues from understanding the skills needed for technology jobs, to innovative new programs and tools to help high school students succeed in achieving Indiana's new Graduation Pathways standards.

The state also was looking at how to harness the many resources focused on talent development and evolving their value proposition to meet a most pressing concern: workforce quality — knowing that talent attracts and keeps businesses in Indiana.

The office of Career Connections and Talent, led by Secretary Blair Milo, and in partnership with Indiana's economic development arm, launched a new framework to attract, develop and connect Hoosier talent.

The 21st Century Talent Region, so declared by the governor, allowed geographies to define as a region. From there, they would build and implement a plan to increase educational attainment, raise household income and grow population.

Coincidentally, these were the same three outcomes cited as most important in our regional IGNITE plan.

To become a 21st Century Talent Region required a commitment to work across organizations. Collaboration was key and included participation from local government, business, K-12 education, economic development, higher education, nonprofits and workforce development. We assembled a leadership team to work on the application process.

The team studied the process and then looked at the IGNITE plan to determine what activities and initiatives aligned. A collaborative talent plan was charted, complete with goals and measurable outcomes. We intentionally added initiatives to focus more on equity and inclusion for children, and preparing youth and adults for jobs in our key industry sectors today and tomorrow.

Through the plan, we envision that students will be able to identify a career and educational path earlier

to achieve a post-secondary credential and employment. Adult workers will be able to transition to new career opportunities. Businesses will have access to the talent needed to grow, and community leaders will be able to better assess and invest in resources to develop, attract, connect and retain talent.

We are delighted that Gov. Eric Holcomb declared Northwest Indiana a 21st Century Talent Region on Sept. 17, 2020. This well-deserved designation belongs to the people of Northwest Indiana. However, this designation does come with the following directives: narrowing the equity gap by increasing the graduation rate of minority and underserved students by 5%; increasing work-based learning opportunities for

"Talent is any economy's most precious resource."

— William Kerr
Harvard economist



► **Linda Woloshansky** is president and CEO at the Center of Workforce Innovations in Valparaiso.

How do communities achieve this? Through talent. They must have talent to create, manage and run businesses; to plan and construct good neighborhoods, houses, buildings and infrastructure; and to promote good civic leadership. Simply put, the undeniable core driver of economic development is people.

All of this became evident two years ago during the develop-

ment of Northwest Indiana's strategic plan initiative known as IGNITE.

It was through the IGNITE planning process where more than 100 business and community leaders identified talent as one of five core pillars essential to the economic development of the Region. Northwest Indiana has long been recognized for bringing stakeholders together to build strategies that will develop, improve and enhance our talent.

However, now more than ever, we recognize that talent is a vital asset and one of our economy's most precious resources.

5% How much Northwest Indiana needs to increase the graduation rate of minority and underserved students to remain a 21st Century Talent Region.

students and adults by 10%; and ensuring there is an increase of the attainment of post-secondary credentials by our high school students by 5% each year.

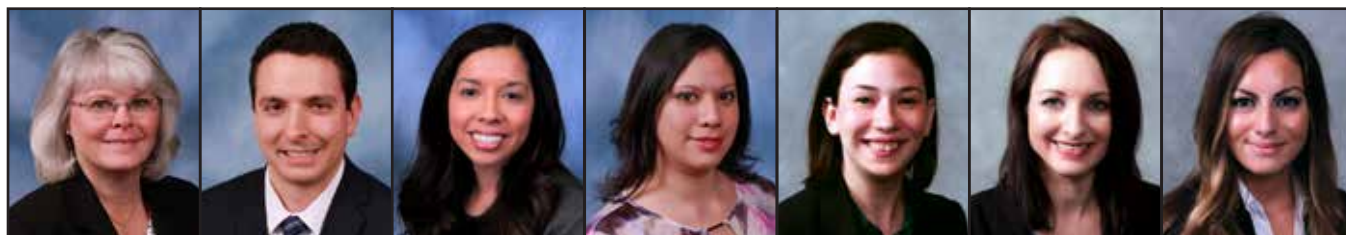
This marks the beginning of our work and the collective work of all the current and future stakeholders, which will lead to a thriving economy for everyone. ■



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