Greater Houston Port Bureau

Port Bureau News

Second & Third Quarter / 2026



Honoring the 2026 Maritime Leader of the Year

Tom Marian

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Safety Isn't a Sunk Cost | From Chaos to Clarity – Port Efficiency | Houston Wilderness

What's the Secret to Continuous Creativity With Gen AI?

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Captain's Corner

Celebrating the Success of the 2026 Maritime Dinner, State of the Ports, and the Economic Power of Our Port Region

The Greater Houston Port Bureau has always been about bringing the maritime community together and 2026 has provided some outstanding examples of what we can accomplish when our industry works together.

From another record-setting Maritime Dinner to a tremendous turnout at the State of the Ports Commerce Club Luncheon with our friends from the Bay Area Houston Transportation Partnership, (BayTran), this year has demonstrated the strength, diversity, and continued growth of the greater Houston-area maritime community. These events are more than opportunities to gather; they are important platforms for recognizing our industry, strengthening relationships, sharing information, and supporting the work of the Greater Houston Port Bureau throughout the year.

2026 Maritime Dinner: A Record-Setting Evening

Our 2026 Maritime Dinner was a tremendous success, generating record results and reflecting the outstanding efforts of our staff, volunteers, sponsors, members, and board of directors. This year's dinner honored Tom Marian of Buffalo Marine Service, and the evening brought together leaders from across the maritime, energy, transportation, business, and government communities. The response from our members and supporters was exceptional.



We assigned a record 862 tickets, with close to 800 guests in attendance, including over 40 elected officials. Those numbers tell only part of the story. The true measure of the evening was the tremendous level of support from throughout our membership and the broader maritime community. The Maritime Dinner has become one of the premier gatherings of the Houston maritime community, and this year's results demonstrate that its importance continues to grow.

Most importantly, the success of the dinner directly supports the Port Bureau's mission. The resources generated through the event allow us to continue providing information, advocacy, networking, vessel movement services, industry programs, and initiatives that benefit the broader maritime community.

To everyone who purchased a table, sponsored the dinner, attended, volunteered, donated, or helped make the evening a success - thank you. The 2026 Maritime Dinner was truly a reflection of the strength of our membership and the community we represent.

State of the Ports: Celebrating Our Entire Port Region

Another highlight of the year was the 2026 State of the Ports Commerce Club Luncheon, which brought together approximately 440 attendees from across the region's maritime and business community. The event provided an excellent opportunity to showcase the strength, growth, and future of our port region while highlighting the important work being accomplished at each of our ports.



One of the most valuable aspects of State of the Ports is that it brings the leadership of our regional ports together in one room. Houston, Texas City, Galveston, Freeport, and the surrounding maritime community are connected by geography, infrastructure, cargo, customers, workforce, and shared supply chains. Each port has its own identity and areas of specialization, but together they form one of the most important maritime regions in the country.

A huge THANK YOU goes to our Port Directors and their teams for their participation, preparation, and continued partnership with the Greater Houston Port Bureau and BayTran. Their willingness to come together and share their perspectives is an important part of what makes this event successful. It also demonstrates the collaborative spirit that exists throughout our port community.

I am extremely proud of what we continue to accomplish together and the success of State of the Ports is a reminder that our region should not be viewed simply as a collection of individual ports. We are part of a connected maritime ecosystem that supports energy, manufacturing, international trade, agriculture, transportation, logistics, and thousands of businesses throughout Texas and the nation. That connectivity is one of our greatest strengths.



AI-Generated Image

The Economic Impact: Nearly $1 Trillion in National Value

The significance of the maritime industry is perhaps best demonstrated by the latest economic impact data released by Port Houston. A new Economic Impact Study, based on 2025 activity, found that marine cargo activity through the public and private facilities along the Houston Ship Channel, collectively referred to in the study as the Port of Houston, supported an extraordinary $986.9 billion in total annual economic value across the United States and approximately 3.53 million jobs nationwide.

The study also found that Houston Ship Channel maritime activity supported $537.7 billion in annual economic value in Texas, equivalent to approximately 18.5% of the state's GDP. It also supported 1,886,172 Texas jobs and generated approximately $15.6 billion in state and local tax revenue. The economic benefits reached 98% of Texas counties. The growth since the previous study is particularly noteworthy. Between 2022 and 2025, the economic value supported by maritime activity in the region increased by $98.4 billion, while the number of Texas jobs supported by port activity increased by 345,755. These figures reinforce something those of us working in the maritime industry already know: our ports are economic engines that reach far beyond the waterfront.

The Houston Ship Channel connects Texas producers, manufacturers, energy companies, and consumers with markets throughout the United States and around the world. Its impact extends well beyond the physical boundaries of the channel.

A Regional Story, Not Just a Houston Story

While the Port Houston study provides an extraordinary measure of the economic impact of the Houston Ship Channel, it is important to recognize that Houston is only one part of the greater port region we represent. Our broader Gulf Coast maritime community includes the Port of Texas City, Port of Galveston, and Port Freeport, each of which supports significant economic activity, jobs, investment, and trade. Together, these ports represent an extraordinarily diverse maritime economy, from energy, chemicals, and bulk cargo to containers, automobiles, project cargo, cruise activity, and other forms of international and domestic trade.

For that reason, the $537.7 billion Texas figure from the Port Houston study should not be presented as the combined economic impact of Houston, Texas City, Galveston, and Freeport.

That broader perspective is important. Our region's strength is not based on one port. It is based on the combined capabilities of multiple ports, waterways, terminals, industries, businesses, and communities working together. That is precisely why the work of the Greater Houston Port Bureau remains so important.

As we look ahead, our responsibility is to continue strengthening those relationships, advocating for the infrastructure and policies our industry needs, improving efficiency and information sharing, supporting maritime safety and security, and ensuring that the importance of our port region is understood at the local, state, and national levels.

The results of 2026 give us plenty to be proud of—and even more to build upon.

The future of our maritime community is strong, and the Greater Houston Port Bureau is proud to be part of it.



#myportcommunityisbetterthanyours



CAPT Eric Carrero,
USCG (Ret.)
GHPB President

Port Watch

AN EMERALD ISLE IN A SEA OF ASHES



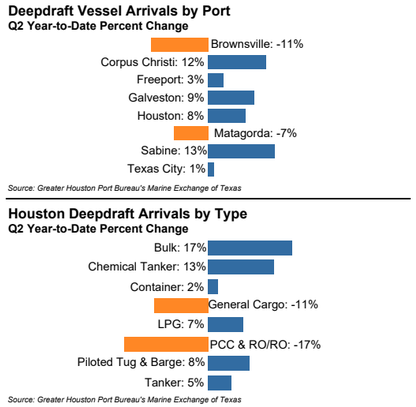
A smokey haze had descended upon Chicago in the late summer of 1871. As one ventured west from the Windy City, the visibility decreased to the point where the Green Island lightkeeper on Green Bay kept the lighthouse lamp lit for the entire month of September – day and night. The inhabitants of Northern Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula discussed a number of explanations for the daylight veil: farmers burning fields to remove stumps; Lumberjacks engaged in aggressive slash-and-burn tactics; railroad construction crews clearing right of ways with fire; and sparks from coal-fired locomotives igniting dried tinder. Undoubtedly, a persistent and record-breaking drought over the past year exacerbated the situation.

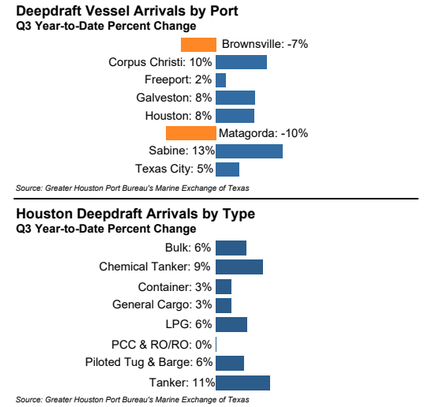
Nestled in the center of northern Wisconsin's vast hardwood forests, the bustling lumber town of Peshtigo was one of many communities benefiting from the voracious demand for wooden products by Chicagoans. Most of the town's residents were employed at the world's largest woodenware factory located in close proximity to the nation's biggest sawmill. Wood was a way of life; boards for houses, chips for roads, saw dust in mattresses and ties for the ever-expanding reach of the railways – it was everywhere. By early October of 1871, that wood was bone dry.

As October 8th dawned, a massive low-pressure system moved eastward towards the Great Lakes bringing with it high winds from the southwest. By the end of the day, those winds had fanned multiple small fires into an epic 2000-degree firestorm. Peshtigo's residents initially detected a "low rumbling noise, like the distant approach of a train." In a matter of minutes that rumble became a thunderous roar accompanied by a 200-foot wall of fire that incinerated everything in its path. A panicked populous fled to the nearby Peshtigo River dodging cattle fleeing in the same direction. Winds in excess of one hundred miles an hour blew people to the ground, burned lungs, and blinded hundreds. In a matter of hours, the town ceased to exist. Two hundred people died in a single tavern and three people who sought refuge in a water tank boiled to death when the fire heated the tank. When the inferno had abated, half of Peshtigo's population had perished and not a single structure remained.

Texas ports throughout the summer were figuratively on fire. The movement of petrochemical and project cargoes dominated the trade landscape. On the brownwater front, the number of tows navigating across the Houston Ship Channel registered back-to-back highs in July and August. Overall, vessel arrivals from the high seas are up 8% for the state – eclipsing prior years by a wide margin.

As always, there are exceptions to the current trends. Brownsville, in particular, is trailing last year's vessel count by 9% due to a marked decrease in both bulkers (down by 7%) and general cargo calls (18% fewer). On the other hand, the eastern "border" port – Sabine – is finishing out the summer with the highest year-over-year gains of all Texas ports. The 13% increase in vessel arrivals was bolstered by a 60% jump in LPG arrivals and 18% more tanker port calls. Tankers also posted their highest arrival count for the year in August. Bulkers followed suit with their highest arrival tally and are up 7% for year. Chemical tankers added heft to the summer, logging their best month in July; to date they are outpacing last year's arrivals by 7%. In short, maritime trade is booming in East Texas.
The city of Corpus Christi may be in the midst of a water crisis but it certainly does not lack for waterborne trade. It, too, is ahead of 2025's arrival stats by double digits – 10%. Like Sabine, BTU commerce has been dominating the waterfront. Tankers – the port's most frequent constituent – may be up only 2% but its 2nd largest customer – chemical tankers – are up 25% for the year. LNG transits registered their two best months in July and August adding to its percentage gains over the last year – currently at 36%. Yet, the most impressive development for the year has been the 51% leap in bulker movements.





The Port of Galveston is also having a banner year as evidenced by the record number of cruise ships and tanker port calls. Both categories remain ahead of the prior year's numbers by 8% and 10% respectively. Chemical tanker arrivals were particularly robust in August with their highest count for the year. Undoubtedly, the port's recent expansion has been instrumental in attracting 15% more bulkers and 11% more RoRo vessels year-to-date.

Freeport's total vessel count continues to outpace Galveston by a dozen or two; however, its year-over-year gain is a mere uptick of 2%. Despite the BTU export binge that is dominating Texas ports, the majority of Freeport's vessel categories are off for the year. Crude has been a major exception as evidenced by a substantial 62% gain in tanker arrivals. LPG has continued to post positive numbers for the year but chemical tankers – Freeport's most popular vessel arrival – are lagging along with LNG.

Meanwhile, the Port of Texas City experienced a healthy summer bounce. August witnessed the highest arrival count in 2026 resulting in a 36% monthly ascent. Every vessel category saw positive percentage gains with chemical tankers and LPG vessels posting monthly highs. The dramatic gains for the summer pushed the port's arrival count well into positive territory.

Texas trillion-dollar miracle – the Port of Houston – did not disappoint during the waning days of summer. Ordinarily, summer in the port is a respite before the fall flurry of traffic. Not so, this year. General cargo arrivals posted their two best months in July and August. Container vessels and integrated tows chalked up their highest arrivals in August as well. The nation's largest export port lived up to its reputation with 8% more tanker calls, 10% more chemical tanker arrivals, and 6% more LPG vessel moorings as compared to 2025. Conversely, while a never abating TEU count continues to outpace prior tallies, export activity in this arena is waning. Nonetheless, containers, ladened with imports, have shrugged that off as the demand for consumables by an ever-growing population persists.

The destruction of Peshtigo and dozens of other communities within the 1.2-million-acre swath of ashes received scant media attention despite the loss of over 2000 people. That same evening, Chicago was aflame and over 17,000 wooden structures were destroyed leaving 100,000 homeless and 300 dead. Consequently, Chicago's plight was plastered on newspapers from coast to coast. Yet, a persistent rumor of a miracle in the hamlet of Robinsonville, Wisconsin (modern day Champion, WI) was making its rounds on the eastern shore of Green Bay.

Upon the grounds at which the Queen of Heaven had appeared to a young Belgian immigrant - Adele Brice – stood a small chapel on 5 acres of donated land. The chapel was built by Adele's father and bore the inscription "Our Lady of Good Help, Pray for Us." The story of the Marian apparitions that took place on October 9, 1859, was well known and the faithful considered the site to be a sacred and holy place. When the fires raged throughout Door County 12 years later, it became a place of refuge for scores of families from the surrounding countryside.

Adele gathered the desperate families onto the Chapel grounds. She and the besieged refugees prayed numerous rosaries while they paraded a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary around the grounds throughout the night. Despite the blistering heat and explosion of trees from relentless flames, the compound remained unsinged. After hours of prayers and hymns of praise to Jesus Christ, the fire subsided and rain fell when morning arrived. Remarkably, the entire compound was untouched by the firestorm but the exterior fence surrounding the Chapel grounds was badly charred. In fact, the only well that did not go dry from the fires was the Chapel's shallow one.

Father Peter Pernin, Pastor for the Catholic churches in Peshtigo, Marinette, and logging towns such as Robinsonville in Door County survived the destruction of Peshtigo by spending over 5 hours in the frigid Peshtigo River. In the aftermath of the fiery conflagration, he did what he could to tend to the needs of his flock. It was also imperative that he assessed the state of churches under his care. As he travelled to the various parishes he served, he observed that the great inferno had wiped Robinsonville from the map - save the modest Chapel built by Adele's father. Father Pernin recounted, the sacred site was surrounded by utter desolation. Its survival defied all natural explanations. It was, "An Emerald Isle in a sea of ashes."



Tom Marian
Buffalo Marine Service
buffalomarine.com



This year, the Greater Houston Port Bureau is proud to recognize Tom Marian as its 2026 Maritime Leader of the Year, honoring a career defined by service, leadership and an enduring commitment to the maritime community.

Tom Marian's journey has taken him from California to New York, across borders and back to the United States, and eventually to the Texas Gulf Coast. Along the way, he served in the U.S. Coast Guard, practiced law, led Vessel Traffic Service in Houston and Galveston and built a decades-long career in the maritime industry.



The story of Tom Marian is about more than the places he has been or the positions he has held. It is about a lifetime of service, a commitment to the maritime community and the relationships he has built along the way.

From his early years in the Coast Guard to his leadership in the Houston maritime community, Tom's career has connected him with the people and organizations that keep our waterways moving.

A Career That Followed the Waterways



After growing up between California, New York and Ontario, Tom crossed the border once again to attend the U.S. Coast Guard Academy. Upon graduating in 1984, he was assigned to a buoy tender in San Juan, Puerto Rico. What followed was a Coast Guard career that took him through New Orleans, Honolulu and Seattle, where he worked in waterways management.

That experience eventually led him back to New Orleans and Tulane Law School. After earning his law degree, Tom served as a Judge Advocate with the Eighth Coast Guard District.

In 2000, he was detailed to the Joint Interagency Task Force South in Key West as the command's legal advisor. His next assignment brought him to the Houston-Galveston area as Commanding Officer of Vessel Traffic Service Houston/Galveston. In 2005, Tom retired from the Coast Guard. Two years later, he joined Buffalo Marine Service as General Counsel, a position he continues to hold today.

More Than a Title

Tom's involvement in the maritime community didn't end when he retired from the Coast Guard. It expanded. Over the years, he has served in leadership roles with organizations throughout the region, including the Gulf Intracoastal Canal Association, American Waterways Operators, the Lone Star Harbor Safety Committee, Houston Maritime Center and Museum, Pilot Board Investigation and Recommendation Committee, Southeast Texas Waterway Advisory Council and the Greater Houston Port Bureau.

His work has put him in rooms where decisions about waterways, safety, navigation, infrastructure and the future of the maritime industry are discussed. But his impact can also be measured in something less formal: the relationships he has built throughout the industry.



That spirit of connection comes through in Tom's own reflections on the Port Bureau. After two decades on the organization's board, he has seen its influence grow and has witnessed firsthand the value of bringing the region's maritime community together.

For Tom, maritime leadership has never been simply about one company, one port or one position. It has been about the community.

The Family Behind the Journey

Tom met his future wife, Nancy, while they were both at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy. Four decades later, Nancy has remained alongside Tom through the moves, assignments and adventures that came with his Coast Guard career and maritime life.



Together, they raised five children, and their family has continued to grow, with grandchildren now spread between the West and East Coast.

Behind the Coast Guard officer, attorney, general counsel and industry leader is a husband, father and grandfather, with his family alongside him every step of the way.



A Lifetime of Service

From a young Coast Guard officer in Puerto Rico to a leader in the Houston maritime community, Tom Marian's career has been connected by one constant, the waterway.

His journey has crossed coasts, jurisdictions, professions and generations. Along the way, he has served his country, represented the maritime industry, advised organizations, chaired committees, mentored colleagues and helped strengthen the relationships that keep the region moving.

Today, Tom and Nancy call Texas home. And after a lifetime spent following the water, it seems fitting that he would find himself surrounded by the maritime community that has become such an important part of his life.



The Greater Houston Port Bureau is proud to recognize Tom Marian not simply where his career has taken him, but the many people and communities he has helped along the way.



Briceidy Deciga
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97th Annual Port Bureau Maritime Honors Tom Marian

The Greater Houston Port Bureau welcomed more than 800 guests at the Bayou City Event Center from Houston's maritime community to honor Tom Marian, general counsel and vice president of Buffalo Marine Service, Inc., as the Port Bureau's 2026 Maritime Leader of the Year. Marian was recognized for his exceptional leadership and steadfast dedication to advancing the maritime sector and Houston port region at our 97th Annual Maritime Dinner on Aug. 22.

Title sponsor Buffalo Marine Service, Inc., and Queen of the Fleet sponsors Callan Marine, Energy Transfer, Enterprise Products Partners L.P., Kinder Morgan, Kirby Corporation, McGriff, Liskow, Port Houston, Shamrock Marine, Targa Resources, the Thomas Marian Family and Vopak helped make the event a superlative evening of celebration.

The cocktail reception and gourmet dinner was followed by a special recognition program, opened by CAPT Eric Carrero, president of the Port Bureau. In his introduction, Carrero detailed Marian's maritime career, describing him as a visionary, a champion of commerce and a steadfast leader in the maritime community.

Proclamations designating August 22 as "Tom Marian Day" from Harris County were presented by Adrian Garcia, Harris County Precinct 2 commissioner and from the City of Houston by Vincent DiCosimo, senior vice president of government affairs at Targa Resources and Port Bureau chairman.

"The maritime industry succeeds not because of individual bottom lines, but because of the shared waterways that we have and the demand of a cooperative, selfless response that we all put forward," said DiCosomio. "When we work together as a community of interest, commerce moves, ports thrive and our nation is served. These words sum up what we are here to talk about and how we will honor Tom tonight."

The special presentations were followed by keynote speakers Bill Diehl, immediate past president, Greater Houston Port Bureau; Tim Studdert, president of Shamrock Marine and Buffalo Marine Service, Inc.; and Patrick Studdert, CEO of Buffalo Marine Service, Inc. Speakers applauded Marian's contributions and shared their perspectives of his life, career, and achievements in the port community.

"I want to discuss his leadership mindset. Tom is involved, inclusive and incisive. He shows up, brings people together, he makes decisions, and he takes action," said Diehl. He characterized Marian's leadership as an embodiment of the Coast Guard's motto, "Semper Paratus" [always ready], linking his comments back to their shared time at the Coast Guard Academy and in their later careers. "Without Tom's semper paratus leadership, many things in this port, including the Port Bureau, would not be running as well as they are today. Thank you, Tom, for reminding us that true leadership means always being ready for others, for the community, and for the challenges ahead."

"I look at Tom as my business partner – not just my lawyer, but as my mentor," said Tim Studdert. "You've taken care of me for years. You have kept me out of trouble. You have my back every single day. You have Buffalo's back every single day. You have this whole community! You have been such a leader to me, and I thank you."

Patrick Studdert capped off the keynote speakers, recounting the value of Marian's contributions to Buffalo Marine Service.

"Here is Tom's job description: whatever has to be done! … His beliefs, feelings, and dedications are the same as mine. We have a personal obligation to service this port and the other ports that surround our port. It is our job to take care of this community … His integrity supports us all in this big marine world we live in."

More of Marian's colleagues also shared their congratulations and comments via a special video prepared by Buffalo Marine. Patrick Studdert, frequently known in the industry as "coach" and for presenting a football on special occasions, surprised Marian by the presentation of a football helmet. "Twenty years ago, I gave Tom a football. All our employees get a football – the word is 'don't drop that ball'. He's had nothing to protect that unique brain in our industry, so tonight I've brought him the first Buffalo Marine helmet! Thank you for protecting us all."

In recalling the diverse experiences of his life and career journey, and particularly of the synergy of the port region, Marian spoke with a wit that never lost its substance. He concluded his remarks with a heartfelt appreciation of faith and of his colleagues, associates, family and friends.

"Thank you for your belief and support of the Port Bureau and for this honor that was earned by the efforts of the many. God bless – and thank you," said Marian.

The formal program concluded with the presentation of a replica of the U.S.S. Constitution. The presentation of the ship to each honoree has been a Port Bureau tradition for many years. Guests continued the celebration at the post-event social in The Lounge. Music, gourmet lite bites, and cocktails topped off the evening.

The Greater Houston Port Bureau is privileged to honor leaders and companies offering outstanding commitment to Houston's maritime community.



Judith Schultz
Greater Houston Port Bureau

























Maritime Education Corner

Bridging the Gap Between Maritime Education and Industry



Photos courtesy of Texas A&M University Galveston

Dr. Cassia B. Galvao, from Texas A&M University-Galveston's College of Marine & Science & Maritime Studies, recently sat down with John F. Hark, Chartering Director, North America, for Bertling Logistics, to discuss the skills students need, the evolving role of technology, and how educators and employers can work together to build the maritime workforce of the future.

With nearly 25 years of teaching experience and more than three decades in the maritime and logistics industry, John F. Hark, Jr. brings a unique perspective to the classroom and the workplace. Hark teaches brokerage, chartering and maritime transportation.He is also deeply involved in workforce development and industry-education initiatives, including serving as Faculty Advisor to the Student Association of Maritime Administrators and as a board member of Port Houston Partners in Maritime Education.

FROM THE CLASSROOM TO THE WORKPLACE

What is the biggest gap between what students learn in the classroom and what they encounter when they enter the maritime industry?

In the classroom, we give students the fundamentals. In my brokerage and chartering courses, for example, students learn the theory of the chartering industry, the mechanics of negotiation, charter party clauses, international laws governing maritime trade, and the financial aspects of chartering.

What is harder to teach is how to operate in a fast-paced industry, particularly when disruption has become almost structural rather than episodic. Since COVID, we have experienced continuing geopolitical events, supply chain disruptions, tariffs, weather events and other challenges. Dealing with those situations requires experience and wisdom, but we can begin preparing students by developing their critical and creative thinking.

Another word I increasingly use is finesse, in its positive sense. Maritime professionals often need to handle customer issues, claims, negotiations and unexpected problems with judgment and sensitivity. That also requires a sense of urgency. Students should begin developing these capabilities while they are still in college through leadership positions, student organizations, industry events, internships and other experiences.

We teach the theory, but on the first day of work, graduates may also be expected to write a clear professional email, communicate with someone overseas, respond quickly to a problem and begin demonstrating judgment. That is where the transition from classroom knowledge to professional practice becomes critical.

PREPARING FOR AN AI-DRIVEN INDUSTRY

Artificial intelligence is transforming the maritime industry. Which changes will most reshape the skills employers expect from graduates?

I expect young professionals entering the workforce to understand these tools. They need to know how to use platforms such as ChatGPT and other AI applications, what those tools can and cannot do, and where their limitations are.

That does not mean using AI to write papers or avoid learning. It means understanding how AI can support professional work, including data analytics, summarizing information, reviewing contracts and charter parties, and processing large amounts of information.

Students also have to take responsibility for learning these technologies themselves. Technology is changing so rapidly that universities and professors will inevitably struggle to keep curricula completely current. Students therefore need agency over their education.

Ten or 15 years ago, I told students they needed to stand out by knowing Microsoft Word, PowerPoint and especially Excel. AI is becoming similar. Employers increasingly expect graduates to arrive with some familiarity.

Ultimately, this comes back to lifelong learning. Students need to understand that lifelong learning does not begin after college. It begins in college.

Technology should enhance human capability, not replace the ability to read, write, communicate, reason, and make decisions.

BRINGING MARITIME INTO THE CLASSROOM

How can educators better connect traditional business disciplines such as accounting, finance, marketing and management to ports, shipping, terminals and logistics?

When you are educating students for a niche industry such as maritime, I believe there is an obligation to incorporate that industry into foundational courses, not only specialized upper-level courses. Accounting, finance, marketing, management, leadership and human resources can all incorporate maritime examples and challenges. Otherwise, we risk teaching the discipline without adequately connecting it to the environment where graduates will work.

Industry professionals can help. Educators can approach organizations such as the Greater Houston Port Bureau and other professional associations and ask whether they can identify an HR professional to speak to an HR class or connect a CFO with an accounting course.

But this is a two-way street. Business professionals also need to reach into education. It is not enough for employers to complain that universities are not producing the people they need. Industry has to become part of the solution.

That participation can occur through advisory councils, classroom presentations, mentoring, student organizations, internships, professional associations or eventually teaching as an adjunct professor.



The relationship also has to be consistent. A brand (and trust in that brand) is built through time and consistency. The same applies to an educational institution's relationship with industry. Professors need to attend industry events, invite professionals into classrooms and maintain relationships. You cannot do it once and expect lasting results.

Houston has an especially strong opportunity because its maritime education ecosystem includes high schools, community colleges, universities, industry organizations and one of the country's major maritime clusters. Developing that ecosystem requires sustained engagement.

WHAT MAKES A GRADUATE INDUSTRY-READY?

What distinguishes graduates who are truly industry-ready from those who are academically well prepared but struggle to transition into professional practice?

Industry-ready graduates demonstrate critical thinking, interpersonal skills, professional awareness and some degree of finesse.

Internships help, but not every student will have an internship. Students can develop many of these abilities through leadership positions, student organizations, volunteering, part-time employment and other activities.

Students also need to become students of the world around them. Maritime is a global industry. A graduate should have some awareness of issues such as the Strait of Hormuz, decarbonization, seafarer shortages, geopolitical conflicts, automation and AI.

They do not need to be experts on every subject. But if they attend an interview, luncheon or professional event, they should be able to ask an employer, How is this development affecting your company?

Students should also get outside their comfort zones. Join organizations beyond your major. Meet students from different countries. Develop cultural awareness. The maritime industry is global, and graduates need to be prepared to interact with people whose backgrounds and perspectives may be very different from their own.

Nobody is 100 percent ready for their first job. Employers understand that there will be a learning curve. But students can do many things during college that make that transition considerably easier.



THE PROFESSIONAL SKILLS THAT MATTER

Employers increasingly value problem solving, communication and interdisciplinary abilities. Which professional skills are most important in today's maritime workplace?

Writing is one of the most important. From the first day on the job, a graduate may have a laptop and an email account and be expected to communicate with colleagues overseas, trucking companies, steamship lines, stevedores, customers or other partners. They need to communicate clearly and professionally.

Alongside writing, I would emphasize verbal communication and critical thinking.

That is one reason I encourage students to think carefully about electives. Take maritime electives, certainly, but also consider psychology, philosophy, science, mathematics or other subjects that help you develop intellectually. Do not take an elective simply to check a box.

Universities should deliberately create opportunities for students to write, speak, discuss difficult subjects, think ethically and defend their reasoning.

Reading is equally important. Maritime professionals may have to read lengthy contracts, purchase orders, charter parties, regulations and reports. Professional life does not arrive in short snippets. Interestingly, AI may make these human capabilities even more important. To use AI effectively, you still need to communicate clearly. And professionals cannot become completely dependent on technology. The internet may go down; systems may fail. Work still has to continue.

INDUSTRY MUST HELP BUILD THE WORKFORCE

What role should industry play in shaping university curricula beyond providing internships?

I often attend industry conferences where there is a workforce panel and employers say, “We cannot find good people,” or complain about the preparation of new graduates. My response is: be part of the solution.

Companies have numerous ways to become involved. Most logistics and maritime education programs have advisory councils, and schools actively seek professionals who can provide feedback.

Companies can offer internships, send employees into classrooms, mentor students, participate in curriculum discussions and encourage experienced professionals to teach.

Internships themselves require commitment. Someone has to supervise the intern, develop meaningful work and explain to staff why mentoring that student matters. But companies cannot simply continue recruiting experienced employees from competitors. The industry needs to develop its future workforce.

Companies therefore need sustained relationships with educational institutions rather than contacting schools only when they suddenly need employees.

MAKING MARITIME CAREERS VISIBLE

Maritime competes with many other industries for young talent. What can educators and employers do together to make maritime careers more visible and attractive?

Almost every industry is talking about a talent gap, so maritime is competing for the same young people.

We need to explain why maritime offers opportunities connected to issues younger generations already care about. This is an international industry. You can work with people around the world, interact with different cultures, travel and potentially work in other countries.

It is also an industry at the center of environmental transformation. Decarbonization, alternative fuels, emissions regulation and sustainability are major challenges. At the same time, automation is changing terminals, trucks, vessels and logistics operations.

These are not reasons to avoid maritime. They are reasons to enter it. We need young people who want to solve these problems.

Visibility is another challenge. Houston is fortunate because industry organizations, nonprofits, schools and advisory councils already do significant outreach. But we can do more, including reaching younger students and their parents. We therefore need to tell the positive story more effectively: maritime is technologically advanced, international, environmentally consequential, economically essential and fundamentally an industry of people.

LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Looking back over your career, which experiences outside the classroom proved most valuable? Are there lessons students simply cannot learn from textbooks?

For me, part-time work was important. I worked on campus and had summer jobs that were not necessarily related to maritime. Simply having a job teaches responsibility and how to work with other people.

Student organizations were also important. I was involved with SAMA and eventually became its president. I also served on a student judicial board. Those experiences developed leadership, critical thinking, decision-making and interpersonal skills.

Students sometimes underestimate experiences that are not directly related to their degree. Leadership positions, volunteering, part-time jobs and student organizations all contribute to professional development.

Internships are extremely valuable, although requiring them can create practical challenges if there are not enough positions available. One possibility is to provide alternatives such as industry-based research projects that require students to interact directly with professionals.

The larger point is that students should not reach their final semester with good grades but no industry events, employment experience, campus involvement or professional relationships. The clock starts when you are a freshman.

A MARITIME CONTEXT THROUGHOUT EDUCATION

If you could redesign one aspect of maritime higher education tomorrow, what would you change first?

I would make sure the maritime context runs throughout the educational experience.

At a maritime institution, students should encounter maritime examples not only in specialized courses such as marine insurance, admiralty law, inland waterways, port operations or brokerage and chartering.

Accounting, marketing, human resources, leadership, mathematics, science and even English can help students think about the industry in which they are preparing to work.

That does not necessarily require redesigning an entire curriculum. Often it is about contextualization: using industry cases, inviting professionals into classrooms, connecting assignments with maritime issues and drawing on resources in the surrounding community.

Educators have students for a limited amount of time. We should continually ask ourselves: Are we making the most of those years, for the student and for the industry that will eventually employ them?

A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

What final advice would you offer students, educators and employers?

For students, get involved and start building your professional brand early. Develop a sense of agency over your education. Your learning cannot consist only of what happens in class once or twice a week. Pay attention to the industry, attend events, meet people, join organizations and continue learning on your own.

For educators, lean on industry. Bring professionals into classrooms, create productive and continuous advisory relationships and use the expertise available in the local maritime community. Particularly in a specialized field, education cannot operate separately from professional practice.

For employers, be part of the solution. Build relationships with schools and career offices. Encourage employees to serve on advisory councils, mentor students, visit classrooms and participate in educational activities.

Even something as straightforward as a career fair can be improved. When possible, send an alumnus of that school or a younger employee along with the HR representative, someone students can relate to and who can explain what working at the company is actually like.



Organizations such as the Greater Houston Port Bureau can play an important connecting role as well. They can help educational institutions identify professionals in particular disciplines and create additional avenues through which business and education can find one another.

Ultimately, preparing the next maritime workforce is a shared responsibility. Students must take ownership of their development, educators must remain connected to professional practice, and employers must actively participate in developing the talent they hope to hire.



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Safety and Compliance | Strategy

Safety Isn't a Sunk Cost — It's a Business Asset

Many companies treat safety training as a compliance requirement. But new research shows that making safety a strategic priority can actually create value for employees, customers and shareholders

Based on research by Vikas Mittal (Rice Business), Alessandro Piazza (Rice Business), Yixing Chen (Notre Dame), Shrihari Sridhar (Texas A& M), Kyuhong Han (Korea University), Sonam Singh (University of South Florida) and Taehoon Im (Cal State – Northridge)

Key takeaways:

- Safety training isn't merely something to spend money on as part of your mission or vision. Done right, it measurably reduces workplace hazards and injuries, improves customer satisfaction and shareholder returns.
- In B2B buying decisions, a vendor's safety training carries almost as much weight as price and after-sales support, making it the real reason customers choose one company over another. Among companies, increasing safety provides a strong lift in customer value.
- Generic, one-size-fits-all training doesn't work. Research points to a five-step approach — align on meaning, agree on metrics, anticipate problems, target training and incentivize employees — that turns safety into something that actually drives results.
- Real-world examples, from a Texas sheriff's department to a Pennsylvania nursing home chain, show the same pattern: narrow, specific, training directed at key activities produces dramatic results, while vague safety messaging does not.

Companies often view occupational safety trainings as a compliance requirement. They're treated as a necessary expense, something that should be done for regulatory compliance or to feed a company's mission and vision.

Far too often, employees might find themselves slogging through trainings, annoyed the course content relates little to the tasks they do at work. Executives spend on safety training hoping it will ultimately mitigate safety hazards and win regulatory favors. But the reality is that, safety done right accomplishes much more, according to recent papers co-authored by Rice Business Professors Vikas Mittal and Alessandro Piazza in the Journal of Marketing Research and Harvard Business Review.

Companies that invest in safety training as a strategic priority can see real improvements in mitigating safety hazards and preventing workplace injuries, impacting customers' buying decisions, increasing shareholder returns and improving customer satisfaction. "When companies invest in safety strategically, they often see a lift in sales, in profits and in stock price," Mittal says. "Safety is a strategic asset that drives financial performance."

Do safety trainings actually work?

Mittal, Piazza and their research colleagues began by looking at the value of safety training for business-to-business firms in a series of three studies.

The first two tested whether safety training actually reduces risk. In one, they analyzed monthly data from an oil field services company on the following: number of safety trainings, number of accidents and number of safety hazards. They found that for an average work site, as monthly safety training hours per capita increased by 10%, each site had 17.8 to 26.4 fewer safety hazards per person.

The second studied a change in law in New York City. Approved by Mayor Bill de Blasio in October 2017, Local Law 196 requires construction workers across the city's five boroughs to complete 40 hours of Site Safety Training and earn an SST card. Their supervisors had to complete 62 hours.

After the law was enacted, injury rates decreased by 15.56% to 18.84% at construction establishments across New York City, relative to counterparts, a 42% return on safety-training investments. Together, the studies suggest that meaningful investments in safety training can effectively help firms mitigate risk, Mittal says.

Can a focus on safety help win customers?

The third study asked whether or not safety training can win customers.

RICE | BUSINESS
EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

Mittal, Piazza and colleagues recruited 312 managers or higher-up roles in B2B companies in the U.S. Participants were asked to imagine they were the director of procurement services of a global energy company leading a team of specialists tasked with shortlisting the most qualified hypothetical vendors for a system that improves the flow of fluid from wells.

They evaluated the qualified vendors using four criteria: product quality, after-sales support, safety, and price. A vendor's emphasis on safety training measurably increased the odds that buyers would seriously consider their proposal. Safety training carried nearly as much weight in purchase decisions as price and after-sales support, accounting for roughly a fifth of what drove buyers' choices, right alongside quality (the top factor), price, and service.

The takeaway? Safety training isn't just about avoiding accidents, it's something that customers notice and value when they're picking a vendor, and it wins business in its own right. "Typically, companies will keep adding safety trainings because they don't know which add to safety or not," Piazza says. "That's why the majority of trainings are ineffective. But you can statistically identify trainings that lead to better safety. It's something that customers actually notice and reward. Get it right, and it becomes a reason they choose you."

A five-step playbook

In Harvard Business Review, Mittal and Piazza co-authored a practical playbook for leveraging safety as a strategic priority. Companies that get this right follow five key steps:

1. **Align on meaning.** Get everyone in the organization to agree on what safety means for your company.
2. **Agree on metrics.** Stop tracking generic safety numbers and focus on the few metrics statistically tied to outcomes that matter: retention, growth, margins.
3. **Anticipate and prevent problems.** Build systems that catch issues before they happen, instead of reacting after the fact.
4. **Target training.** Make training specific to the exact behaviors that prevent harm, and make it convenient, not a one-size-fits-all exercise.
5. **Incentivize employees.** Reward the specific safe behaviors you want to see, not just outcomes, and put incentives in place proactively, not just after a crisis.

Two examples show what this looks like in practice. Consider the Harris County Sheriff's Office, which runs one of the largest jail systems in Texas. By recognizing inmates as their customers, and treating their safety as a central strategic priority, leadership redesigned how it ran its operation. Treating it as their central priority, guards began checking every cell every 30 minutes to catch early warning signs of distress or aggression, using technology to make sure inmates with serious conditions like diabetes got their medication on time, and scanning incoming mail digitally to stop drugs from being smuggled in on paper.

On-time cell checks now top 99%, inmate deaths are down 30% and staff use-of-force incidents have dropped 23%. A safer, calmer jail also meant less staff turnover, down 24% over three years.

> "You can statistically identify trainings that lead to better safety. It's something that customers actually notice and reward. Get it right, and it becomes a reason they choose you."

Meanwhile, a nursing home chain in Pennsylvania got specific about what safety meant for them: fewer falls and fewer bedsores among residents. When the chain moved training online, focused it specifically on spotting early-stage bedsores, and paid employees $70 to complete it, with a bonus of up to $200 for whichever shift caught the most cases, training completion jumped to 96%, and the bedsore rate among residents dropped from 23% to 9%, a 60% improvement.

Both cases point to the same lesson: paying lip service to safety through generic training or safety minutes doesn't work. It only pays off when it statistically identifies and targets one specific, measurable behavior, is easy for employees to actually complete, and comes with a clear reward, not when it's just a box to check.

"This doesn't mean more investment," Mittal says. "It means stopping useless, feel-good activities that produce no real results. It really should be the CEO who helps turn safety into a strategy driver rather than a feel-good activity. Doing so can meaningfully add to your bottom line."

For CEOs, the research makes the case that safety training is worth talking about publicly, not just as a regulatory requirement, but as something that genuinely matters to customers. Sempra Energy's CEO Jeffrey Martin, for example, described safety in a letter to shareholders as a foundational value at the company, one that shapes how it serves customers and communities.



Deborah Lynn Blumberg
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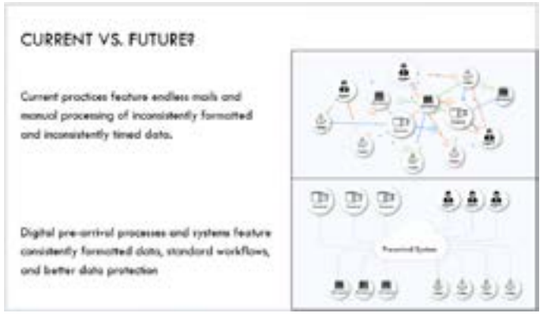
From Chaos to Clarity: Digitizing Pre-Arrival Communications to Improve Port Efficiency

Houston's maritime industry has long understood the strategic importance of the Houston Ship Channel. It is a critical gateway for the region, the state of Texas, and the nation, supporting a broad network of businesses that depend on safe, reliable, and efficient vessel operations. While the Port of Houston is an amazing place, industry benchmarking shows that it can lag behind other international liquid hub ports like Rotterdam and Singapore in terms of tanker turnaround time.

Turnaround time is a key metric when it comes to measuring port efficiency because it includes waiting time, cargo operations, and sailing time. Lower port turnaround times mean that vessels are moving through the port more efficiently. The related impacts include better carrier schedule reliability, increased terminal throughput, reduced demurrage for charterers, and better return on port infrastructure. Efficiency is not simply an operational preference; it is a competitive advantage and a force multiplier for future growth.

One promising lever to reduce port turnaround time is the digitization of pre-arrival communications. Pre-arrival refers to the exchange of key information among the terminal, carrier, agent, and surveyor before a vessel reaches the berth—ideally far enough in advance for questions to be resolved before operations begin. This information may include cargo names and quantities, equipment requirements, physical arrangements, and terminal services such as garbage removal, MARPOL, fresh water, or transshipment needs.

Today, many tanker pre-arrivals in Houston are still mostly managed through manual emails, phone calls, and company specific spreadsheets/forms. Each terminal and carrier may use its own process, making every call a customized exercise. Long email chains can obscure the latest information, widen distribution beyond what is needed, and create unnecessary risk around sensitive commercial data. In this environment, situational awareness often requires piecing together details from multiple changing sources.



Digital pre-arrival platforms offer a more disciplined model. There are various pre-arrival digitization vendors in the market, and they all have their own operating models. That said, it is most common for these systems to be set up whereby the terminal pays the cost and hosting the platform. The terminal then uses the digital platform to invite calling vessels to provide pre-arrival information within a defined timeframe.



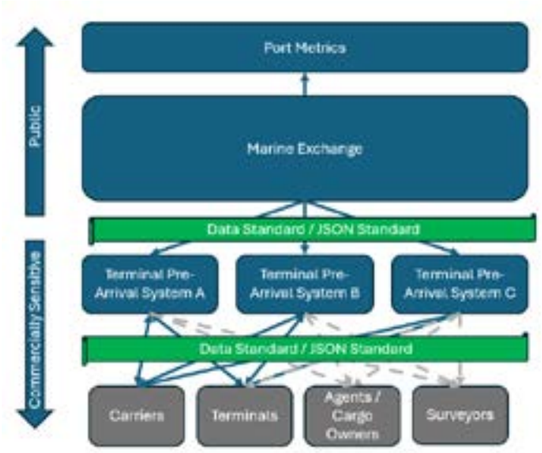
While carriers and terminals are the main information providers to the platform, commercially relevant partners such as agents, surveyors, and charterers can be granted access the platform to view the latest information. Commercially sensitive information is protected while emails and phone calls are minimized for exceptional situations.

While there is a cost to the terminal, the business case is usually compelling. Depending on the terminal and operation, digital pre-arrival processes appear to consistently save between 30 minutes to 1.5 hours alongside per vessel call. Across a year, those savings can translate into meaningful additional capacity, improved berth productivity, lower waiting time, and reduced overall port turnaround time. Importantly, this is not experimental technology. Similar tools are already used in Europe and Asia with positive results, and vendors with proven solutions are now engaging the Houston market.

A key challenge, however, is interoperability. Houston's maritime community is diverse, and companies have already invested in the internal systems that work best for their operations. Digitization should not require every stakeholder to abandon those systems. Instead, the goal should be to make it easier for existing systems to connect securely and consistently with pre-arrival platforms.

To support that objective, the Greater Houston Port Bureau Efficiency Committee developed a back-end pre-arrival data standard. The committee reviewed vessel and terminal pre-arrival forms across oils, gases, and chemicals, identified common data fields, and organized them using consistent naming conventions, definitions, and structure. The resulting standard includes more than 300 data fields and is intended to reduce repeated mapping work as multiple platforms enter the market.

With a common data standard, automation built for one platform can be more readily adapted to others. That gives terminals, carriers, agents, surveyors, and technology providers room to innovate while still working from a shared foundation. In practical terms, it allows Houston to preserve flexibility while accelerating adoption. The data standard also fits into a broader port digitization model that is especially relevant for Houston because there is not currently a single central system governing all port call information. Instead, Houston can evolve as a connected ecosystem.



In the figure, at the top of the ecosystem is a port metrics layer: a public-facing tool that can summarize high-level port performance, support regional marketing, and benchmark Houston against other leading ports. This layer is key to establishing a common foundational understanding of port efficiency in Houston… and it likely that it will exist in the near future. The Greater Houston Port Bureau has already advanced this concept by compiling an RFP for a port metrics KPI vendor and is currently working through the vendor selection process.

Beneath that public metrics layer is a Marine Exchange function. This layer would not replace commercial systems or private platforms. Rather, it would provide a trusted operational information exchange for the port community. Houston's existing Pilot Tracker system can be viewed as an example of this middle layer because it already provides useful information tied to vessel movement and pilotage. Over time, a broader Marine Exchange concept could potentially connect and compile additional operational inputs from government agencies such as, but not limited to Vessel Traffic Services, US Customs, US Coast Guard.

The next layer is where private-sector pre-arrival service providers operate. These platforms are already moving into the Houston market and can help terminals manage commercially sensitive operational information in a secure, structured way. This distinction is important. Not every piece of port call information should be public, and not every stakeholder needs access to every data point. A sound digitization strategy should separate what belongs in public port performance reporting from what belongs in trusted operational exchange and what must remain in permissioned commercial workflows.

This layered approach does not require one mandated platform, nor does it force companies to abandon their existing internal systems. Instead, it creates a common language for port call data. Carriers, agents, cargo owners, terminals, surveyors, and technology vendors can each continue to operate their own systems while using consistent definitions, naming conventions, and data structures when information needs to move between systems.

This is particularly valuable in a market like Houston, where scale and diversity are strengths but also create integration complexity. If each digital platform uses a different structure, every new connection requires new mapping, testing, and maintenance. If platforms align to a common data standard, the industry can reduce duplicate integration work and make automation more scalable. That means a terminal using one pre-arrival system, a carrier using another internal system, and a surveyor relying on still another workflow can exchange information more efficiently because the underlying data is organized consistently.

The practical result is a digitization path that respects Houston's decentralized operating reality. Rather than waiting for a single comprehensive system to emerge, the port community can digitize in layers: public metrics to demonstrate performance, a Marine Exchange layer to improve shared operational awareness, private pre-arrival platforms to manage commercially sensitive workflows, and a common data standard to connect them. This layered approach allows innovation and competition among vendors while still moving the region toward a more coordinated digital future.

Houston's maritime community has a clear opportunity: move pre-arrival communication from fragmented manual exchange to structured, secure, digital collaboration. By doing so, the port region can reduce time alongside, improve throughput, protect sensitive information, and remain competitive with other leading global port regions. The technology is available, the value case is strong, and the data foundation is in place. The next step is adoption.



Lance Nunez,
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Pipelines, utilities and yes, trees in the Houston Ship Channel area.

Every fall and spring, tree planting movements are happening all over the greater Houston Area with a focus on “increasing shade, creating healthier air, building stronger neighborhoods, and making an overall greener Houston”.-Trees for Houston

You may think these plantings are happening just in parks and residential areas, but in 2019 Houston Wilderness pioneered the Houston Ship Channel Trees Program to get trees planted for a positive impact along the industrial corridor of the shipping channel.

The Port of Houston landscape is distributed over a 25-mile long chain of land areas that are utilized for storage and active port operations, and adjacent ports have a similar industrial corridor coverage area. However, significant green spaces still exist among this gray infrastructure and became the setting for the first of over 100k trees planted to date through this program.

Houston Wilderness staff researched, calculated and ranked the ecosystem services values associated with native tree species in our region. Based on these rankings, the top 17 “Super Tree” species are targeted for large-scale plantings along the riparian corridor. These native Super Tree species were ranked in priority based on their respective levels of air pollution absorption (GHGs), water absorption and carbon sequestration. Large-scale, native ‘Super Tree’ plantings provide a multitude of ecosystem services - increased air & water quality, erosion control, phytoremediation and habitat enhancement. So every tree that is planted is working to bring these benefits to all the residents, workers, and visitors of the Ship Channel from the moment the tree establishes its roots!

We have partnered with companies such as SESCO, Air Products, and Kinder Morgan as land hosts for our plantings but our volunteer partners also include Shell, Chevron, and even the Crown Hill Cemetery on Richey Street! We’ve expanded in the third and fourth year of the program to include areas whose tributaries also lead out into Galveston Bay, including Chambers County parks, Dickinson buy-out properties, and Port Freeport buy-outs bringing the chance to “increase shade, create healthier air, and build stronger neighborhoods” into the gray-infrastructure so many of us depend on.

The Houston Ship Channel and Adjacent Ports area -yes- we’ve changed the name to include the areas we’ve expanded into - would love to plant trees and make your industrial-work space just a little greener!

Contact Houston Wilderness at (281) 607-1517 to evaluate your under-utilized green space, stop unnecessary mowing, and instead allow trees to change the landscape you view daily while bringing all of their benefits for your company, workers, and the neighborhood and surrounding areas!

Houston Ship Channel & Adjacent ports TREES program:

Getting involved:
Submit your company or land to be assessed for a tree planting.
Can’t plant trees?
Houston Wilderness also evaluates land for installation of bioswales; the use of native grasses in areas of water retention.



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A full range of tug services,
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AI | Organizational Behavior

What's the Secret to Continuous Creativity With Gen AI?

Generative AI may give users an early boost in creativity, but lasting gains require effective augmented learning through a more active form of human-AI collaboration called "idea co-development."

This story is part of the special anniversary issue of Rice Business Wisdom on artificial intelligence. Based on research by Jing Zhou (Rice Business), Yingyue Luna Luan (University of Queensland), and Yeun Joon Kim (University of Cambridge)

Key Takeaways:

- Augmented learning happens when humans and generative AI learn to work together in ways that improve creativity over time.
- But repeated use alone is not enough. Human-AI creativity can plateau when users rely on gen AI mainly for quick responses or more ideas.
- "Idea co-development" — exchanging feedback, testing ideas and refining them together — can help sustain creative gains.

When generative AI tools like Claude and ChatGPT hit the market, they changed the everyday mechanics of workplace creativity. Brainstorming that once took hours can now begin with a prompt and a machine-made flood of ideas. But faster ideation is not the same as lasting creativity. Indeed, new research finds that collaborating with AI does not boost joint creativity over time, unless users change how they interact with it.

Published in the journal Information Systems Research and co-authored by Jing Zhou, the Mary Gibbs Jones Professor of Management at Rice Business, the paper explores "augmented learning," a process in which people and AI actively adjust to each other across creative tasks, gradually improving what they can produce together.

The paper shows that augmented learning does not happen simply because a human and AI are placed in the same workflow. To keep joint human-Gen AI creativity from stagnating, the researchers found that users need to move beyond prompting for more ideas and learn how to develop better ones.

Why Gen AI's creative advantage fades

To find out if human-Gen AI collaboration naturally matures over time, the researchers conducted three mixed-methods studies. In study 1, participants were asked to generate creative solutions for societal and environmental issues, such as climate change, over 10 consecutive rounds. Some participants worked entirely on their own, while others

collaborated with a custom generative AI chatbot designed to simulate human-like dialogue.

The results were revealing. Participants working alone became more creative through repetition, while AI-assisted participants plateaued. In each round, independent evaluators rated ideas for novelty and usefulness, and early on, AI-assisted participants scored significantly higher. But as the experiment continued across a series of tasks over time, their scores stayed statistically flat. By the seventh round, the human-only group had caught up.

> "The creativity bottleneck has moved from generating ideas to developing them — the slower work of questioning, refining and reshaping ideas after they arrive."

To understand why the advantage faded, the researchers analyzed hundreds of conversations between users and generative AI. Users were generally receptive to AI-generated ideas — that wasn't the issue. The problem lay in how people used the tool: rather than co-developing better ideas with their AI, they simply chased more of them.

In the study, most participants used AI as little more than an idea machine — proposing a concept and waiting for a response, or simply prompting the tool for more. But that kind of transactional back-and-forth did little to improve joint creativity over time.

The inherent strengths of gen AI may help explain why. "Because these tools are already so good at producing varied ideas quickly," Zhou says, "the creativity bottleneck has moved from generating ideas to developing them — the slower work of questioning, refining and reshaping ideas after they arrive."

The harder work of idea co-development

That's where the human role becomes more demanding. The researchers found that continuous improvement primarily happened when users engaged in something they call "idea co-development." In this mode, humans and AI actively exchange critical feedback, combine concepts, reframe problems and refine a single idea into a more viable solution.

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Rather than ask AI to keep producing options, users engage in a set of strategies to make ideas better.
For example, a user might propose a concept, ask the AI to test its practicality, revise the idea based on that critique, impose constraints (e.g., budget, risks) to increase quality and efficiency, and then work with the AI to shape it into a stronger solution. The study revealed that when users gradually increased their engagement in this specific co-development strategy, their joint creativity improved significantly.

Yet, the researchers found that without explicit instructions, engagement with this strategy declined over time, and creativity plateaued for humans using AI tools. So, in a final experiment, the researchers tested whether explicit guidance could facilitate augmented learning. A treatment group of participants received instruction in idea co-development, including how to exchange feedback and refine ideas interactively with AI, while a control group received no such guidance.

The intervention worked. The treatment group showed a significant improvement in joint creativity across tasks, unlike the participants who did not receive training in the strategy of idea co-development. By training users in how to treat AI as a creative partner, rather than a mere idea generator, Zhou et al. found participants produced stronger creative work over time.

How companies can train workers to create with AI

"Our research has major implications for companies eagerly integrating AI into their daily workflows," says Zhou. "To get the most out of these tools, organizations need to assess how their employees are actually using them."

Leaders should train employees to move beyond simple brainstorming — teaching them the co-development strategies from Zhou's research and encouraging them to bring their distinctly human strengths to the process: social judgment, ethical reasoning and emotional intelligence.

Companies deploying AI tools should design systems that push users toward deeper engagement — asking questions, prompting elaboration, rather than just delivering answers. And by training employees in the co-development strategies this research identifies, companies can turn gen AI from a novelty into a lasting driver of creative improvement. stabilizing the firm and reducing repayment risk.



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April Commerce Club Featuring Robert Howden, Senior Adviser and Director of Legislative Affairs for Texas Governor Greg Abbott



The Greater Houston Port Bureau welcomed Robert Howden, Senior Adviser and Director of Legislative Affairs for Texas Governor Greg Abbott, as the featured speaker at the Port Bureau's April Commerce Club luncheon. Howden joined moderator Andrew Biar, founder of Strategic Public Affairs, for a discussion on the key issues that included workforce development, infrastructure, energy, water resources, and public safety.

Highlights from the discussion included:

- Improving workforce development and preparing Texans for careers in high-demand industries. Howden highlighted recent legislation that invested $150 million into expanding career and technical education programs, particularly in rural communities and areas experiencing rapid industrial growth.

- Energy reliability, water resources, and infrastructure needs as Texas continues to experience growth in population, industrial activity, and data center development tied to artificial intelligence and technology expansion.

- Public safety and bail reform are ongoing priorities for the governor's office, particularly in Harris County and the Houston region.

- Continuing support for honoring military veterans and veterans' programs through the Texas Veterans Commission and the Texas National Guard.

- The importance of collaboration between state and local leadership. Howden stressed that cooperation across political lines is essential when addressing issues such as disaster recovery, infrastructure improvements, and economic development.

"We're all Texans," Howden said in conclusion. "No matter who they are, my job is if they need something and we can help, we're going to do it."

Howden brings decades of experience in Texas government and public policy, having worked for four Texas governors and previously leading two of the state's most influential business organizations, NFIB/Texas and the Texas Association of Manufacturers.

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May Commerce Club Luncheon Featuring a Port Efficiency Panel Discussion

Chaos to Clarity: Digitizing Pre-Arrival Communications to Unlock Port Efficiency



A panel of industry experts explored the benefits of digitizing pre-arrival information to improve coordination between terminals and vessels at the Port Bureau's Commerce Club luncheon on May 14.

With Lance Nunez of Dow Inc. serving as moderator, panelists included Darren Shelton of Moran Shipping Agencies, Capt. Peter Kontush of Stolt Tankers, and Shri Sarathy of LBC Tank Terminals.

A central theme to the discussion was reducing port turnaround time by improving coordination before the vessel arrives. "Pre-arrival is the exchange of key information between terminal carrier, agent, and surveyors before the vessel arrives at the terminal," explained Nunez.

Traditional pre-arrival processes rely on a variety of communication channels that create duplicated work and communication gaps. Panelists highlighted how digital pre-arrival platforms centralize cargo, scheduling, and documentation information, generating simplified, secure communication and documentation.

While relatively new to the Houston port region, digital pre-arrival platforms have been extensively implemented in Europe and Asia. Recently, some Houston terminals, like LBC Tank Terminals, have adopted the technology and have already seen reduced ship-shore exchange times by 30-90 minutes. Panelists emphasized that the small-time savings are effective in reducing costs and increasing terminal vessel turnaround. "You save enough little 30-minute chunks, you've got 24 hours or 36 hours, which is enough time for many terminals to get another vessel to the berth," said Darren Shelton.

In wrapping up the session, Nunez, who also chairs the Port Bureau's Efficiency Committee, noted the committee has written documentation for the berth optimization process, including a standardized pre-arrival data set with common fields and terminology, encouraged stakeholders to be a part of the effort to shape efficiency and digitalization in the Houston port region.

The May Commerce Club also included an opportunity to meet with digital solution vendors, giving attendees the opportunity to learn about available tools and engage directly with providers in the pre-arrival system space.

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June Commerce Club Luncheon Featuring Doug Shrock Managing Principal | Artificial Intelligence, Crowe, LLP

Artificial Intelligence: Getting Real Results



AI-Generated Image

Artificial intelligence ("AI") — its far-reaching implications, business impact, and accelerating role in shaping the future — was the focus of the Port Bureau's June Commerce Club event. Doug Schrock, Managing Principal, Artificial Intelligence at Crowe, LLP spoke to the phenomenon from his decades of experience in guiding organizations through pivotal transformations.

To stress the importance of AI's significance to business, Schrock began his presentation by asking the audience to participate in a brief exercise. "Imagine it's 2030 … and I ask you to look back at 2026 and answer the question: did we do too much or not enough on AI in 2026? I think you're going to say how you should have done more ... It's rare that you get a chance to recognize the opportunity in the moment," challenged Schrock.

Schrock described AI as a new force and disruptor to the business world that businesses must learn to apply effectively to keep progressing and stay competitive. He described practical applications as ranging from the automation of routine tasks and analyzing financial data to optimizing scheduling, improving customer response times, and capturing organizational knowledge.

He encouraged organizations to start by identifying their most challenging business problems, then determine where AI can provide measurable value in efficiency, cost, customer service, or employee productivity. Schrock emphasized that successful implementation requires more than simply providing employees with access to AI tools. Training, security, governance, leadership support, and hands-on experience are essential.

Schrock outlined three levels of adopting AI: empowering employees to use AI for individual tasks, redesigning business processes, and rethinking how organizations interact with and serve customers. Throughout each stage, people remain central to successful adoption. "If you can use these tools to address these problems faster, you can outperform the competition in better serving your customers," Schrock said.

Confidentiality and cybersecurity remain important considerations while integrating this new and evolving technology. Schrock recommends businesses upgrade their AI platform above the basic consumer versions, which are not private, so business data is protected at a higher level.

In closing, Schrock urged decision-makers to apply a proven framework for change in AI adoption. He recommended the eight-step model by Dr. John Kotter, Kotter International, Inc., for its simplicity and track-record for effective change management. "Drive for win, celebrate success, run it like a project, track the measured value that you're getting. You're gonna see real results and then you never give up," concluded Schrock.

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July Commerce Club Featuring a Moderated Discussion with Coalter Baker and Roger Guenther, Gulf Coast Protection District

Coastal Texas Project: Where it Stands and What's Ahead for the Ike Dike



The Greater Houston Port Bureau presented a moderated discussion on the progress of the Coastal Protection Project with Coalter Baker, executive director of the Gulf Coast Protection District ("GCPD") and Roger Guenther, president of the GCPD board of directors at the Port Bureau's July Commerce Club luncheon. Bob Sanders, vice present of Enterprise Products Partners, served as moderator. Baker and Guenther highlighted the progress, funding, design, and potential long-term impact of Coastal Protection Project on the region.

Created in 2021, the Gulf Coast Protection District is a non-federal sponsor working to advance two large-scale projects led by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers ("USACE"): Sabine Pass to Galveston Bay Project - Orange County and Port Arthur and the Coastal Texas Project - Galveston Bay Barrier System and Galveston Bay Shoreline and Island Protection. Of these, the Coastal Texas Project is the largest coastal storm-surge protection effort in U.S. history. It combines engineered barriers with nature-based features to protect the upper Texas coast.

The Galveston Bay Barrier System component of the Coastal Texas Project, also known locally as the "Ike Dike," includes seven unique features that is a combination of engineered solutions and natural defenses. Of these features, two moved into design in 2025: The Gate (Bolivar Roads Gate System) and the beaches and dunes system of Boliver and West Galveston Beach.

HDR, Inc., was selected to work on the beach and dune system and Jacobs Engineering to work on the Boliver Roads Gate System. The beach project could begin within five years and includes a double-dune system and an extension of the beach. Jacobs is expected to have an implementation plan for the gate system in 2027.

"They [the gates] are much more complex, obviously, given the amount of traffic coming in and out of the Ship Channel," said Baker. "I can say with certainty that we won't be building anything that the Pilots can't maneuver through. The Pilots are actually going to be on our design team with Jacobs. We've set up an industry advisory committee with some members here to make sure that anything we're designing, folks are able to have input all along the way."

The biggest challenge is securing funding. The Galveston Bay Barrier System, the largest element of the Coastal Texas Project, accounts for 85% of the total $35 billion authorized cost. Congress formally authorized all elements of the Coastal Texas Project to advance into design with the Water Resources Development Act of 2022. As of 2026, the Texas Legislature has appropriated $950 million to GCPD to advance its projects. Congress authorized the appropriation of $7.25 million to the Coastal Texas Project, of which $6.75 million is for the Galveston Bay Barrier System. $10.6 million is proposed for the FY2027 USACE investigations account.

Speakers stressed that continued support from both the state and federal governments as well as the business community are essential. GCPD is developing a stakeholder letter for companies and organizations to sign in support of additional funding and advocacy efforts in Austin and Washington, D.C.

"The important thing is to start and get the design in order and have something, even if it's a piece of it. That's beneficial alone. Shovel ready! A lot of times supplemental funds come from that as well," said Guenther. "It's very important what we're doing with this momentum – starting the design of both the gates and the beach dunes along the shore."

As projects move forward, Baker and Guenther said the top priorities are collaboration with stakeholders on design that accommodates the growth of infrastructure on the waterway and funding.

"It has to be buildable from a cost standpoint, and it has to work. That's how we're gonna get there: through the collaboration," said Guenther.

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The Port Bureau members represent every sector of the maritime industry, from agents to admiralty lawyers, shippers to stevedores, and terminals to truckers. With four membership levels available, members can select the level best suited to their involvement in the maritime industry.

FUTURE EVENTS: txgulf.org/

- November 2: 18th GHPB Annual Captain's Cup Golf Tournament
- November 12: GHPB Commerce Club Luncheon Guest Speaker: TBD
- November 17: Fall Port Bureau Connect - The Riverside Seafood and Grill

MEMBERSHIP: 2026

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