MAINE VISIONARY LEADERS
OCT. 28, 2025 | THE ROUX INSTITUTE AT NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

The New England chapter of NACD hosted an event in Maine featuring discussions on business uncertainty, artificial intelligence implementation, and organizational resilience. The Visionary Leaders panel explored how geopolitical volatility and tariffs are impacting business decisions, while subsequent sessions focused on AI's role in operations and talent attraction strategies. The conversation ended with discussions on company culture, workforce development, and the future impact of AI on entry-level positions, along with announcements of upcoming programs and events.

Summary

Kevin McGovern, president of the New England chapter of NACD, welcomed attendees to the event, expressing gratitude for the partnership with the Roux Institute and the Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce. He highlighted the chapter's commitment to bringing governance and corporate issues to the forefront in Maine, acknowledging the support of chapter sponsors and Lockton as the special sponsor for the session. Chris Mallett, Chief Administrative Officer of the Roux Institute, provided an overview of the institute's mission as a catalyst for economic change and innovation in Maine, emphasizing their collaboration with partners and the development of a permanent future campus.

Speakers:
Bob Montgomery Rice, President and CEO; Bangor Savings Bank
Kaveri Subbarao, Chief Executive Officer; Bernstein Shur
Steve Mills, CEO; Maine Beer Company

Moderator:
Quincy Hentzel, President & CEO; Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce

The panel discussed how geopolitical volatility and tariffs have created a "pause phase" in business decisions, with customers hesitating to make strategic moves due to shifting trade patterns and regulations. Kaveri noted that uncertainty has led to increased legal work as businesses review contracts, while Steve emphasized the importance of maintaining long-term vision while remaining agile in responding to disruptions. The discussion highlighted the need for businesses to recommit to performing well in their core operations and be prepared to pivot when necessary.

Adapting to Economic Disruption

Quincy discussed the importance of having contingency plans and being prepared for business disruptions, citing examples from the construction industry and recent global events like COVID-19 and tariffs. Bob shared that tariffs have led to increased costs and larger contingencies in contracts, while Steve emphasized the need for businesses to adapt by adjusting price strategies and managing employee expectations. The panel agreed that while tariffs may initially impact manufacturers, consumers will eventually bear a significant portion of the cost, and companies must balance profit margins with employee retention in response to economic changes.

AI Integration and Organizational Resilience

The meeting focused on the integration and utilization of artificial intelligence (AI) in various organizational contexts. Quincy emphasized AI's potential as both a disruptor and a tool for businesses to mitigate risks and enhance resilience. Participants discussed their approaches to generative AI, with Kaveri highlighting the importance of client consent and ethical use in law firms, while Bob and others shared how AI is used to enhance operational efficiency and decision-making. Quincy and Chris described initiatives at their bank, including the development of a "Conversation Engine" to improve customer service and data system harmonization to ensure accuracy and efficiency. The discussion also touched on the need for AI training and the positive reception of employees to AI adoption, with Quincy noting that employees are eager to upskill and adapt to AI-driven changes.

AI Implementation and Talent Strategies

The meeting focused on AI implementation and talent attraction in businesses. Quincy emphasized the importance of educating boards on AI, highlighting its potential as a competitive advantage while acknowledging risks. She discussed concrete examples of AI use, such as summarizing vendor contracts and transcribing board meetings. The group also addressed the challenge of attracting and retaining talent in Maine, with Bob noting that recruiting has become easier post-COVID but talent shortages persist. Kaveri and Steve shared their approaches to talent attraction, emphasizing the creation of a unique employee value proposition and fostering a positive work culture.

Resetting Culture Amid Disruptions

Quincy discussed the importance of using disruptions like COVID-19 as opportunities to reset company culture, realign with mission and values, and address performance standards in the workforce. Emphasized was the need for constant and open communication between boards and C-suites, particularly during times of uncertainty, and highlighted the importance of transparency in sharing the fiscal health of the organization with employees. Bob added that boards should support C-suite executives in making necessary changes and adjustments, while maintaining trust and encouraging bold action.

Enhancing Board and Enterprise Resilience

Quincy emphasized the importance of regular communication between boards, C-suites, and teams, highlighting the need for open dialogue and addressing concerns to maintain a resilient business culture. Also discussed was the significance of managing data and AI within organizations, advocating for controlled enterprise solutions and adherence to data retention regulations. The panelists addressed the role of board members, encouraging them to contribute expertise, ask critical questions, and foster collaborative dynamics.

AI's Impact on Entry-Level Jobs

The panel discussed the impact of AI on entry-level job opportunities and noting that while AI hasn't yet affected these roles, companies are preparing for its future impact by upskilling new hires faster. Additionally, they discussed workforce development, emphasizing the value of character, leadership skills, and a proactive approach to hiring, particularly for first-generation students.

Five Key Take-A-Ways

1. Geopolitical Uncertainty Has Triggered a "Pause Phase" Companies are holding back on major strategic moves as tariffs and volatile trade policies create unpredictability. Leaders are re-evaluating contracts, cost structures, and global supply chains — essentially waiting out instability while focusing on operational excellence and readiness to pivot quickly.

2. Agility and Core Strength Are the Twin Anchors: Across industries, panelists agreed that resilience now depends on two things: staying exceptional at your core business and remaining nimble enough to adjust to external shocks. Firms that combine disciplined execution with flexible strategies are best equipped to thrive amid constant disruption.

3. AI Is Reshaping Risk Management and Workforce Strategy: AI emerged as both disruptor and safety net. Leaders discussed using AI to streamline decision-making, improve client service, and ensure data integrity — but also stressed governance, ethics, and employee education. Upskilling the workforce and educating boards on AI's strategic and ethical dimensions are now table stakes for staying competitive.

4. Disruption Is an Opportunity to Reset Culture: Rather than merely surviving crises like COVID or tariff shocks, strong leaders use these moments to realign culture, mission, and accountability. Transparent communication between boards, management, and employees — especially around financial realities — builds trust and strengthens enterprise resilience.

5. The Future Workforce Equation: Skills, Character, and Adaptability: The talent conversation underscored that resilience isn't just about technology; it's about people. Companies are balancing AI adoption with human development — hiring for character and leadership potential, accelerating training, and integrating diverse and first-generation talent. Boards must guide this evolution with curiosity and courage.

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