



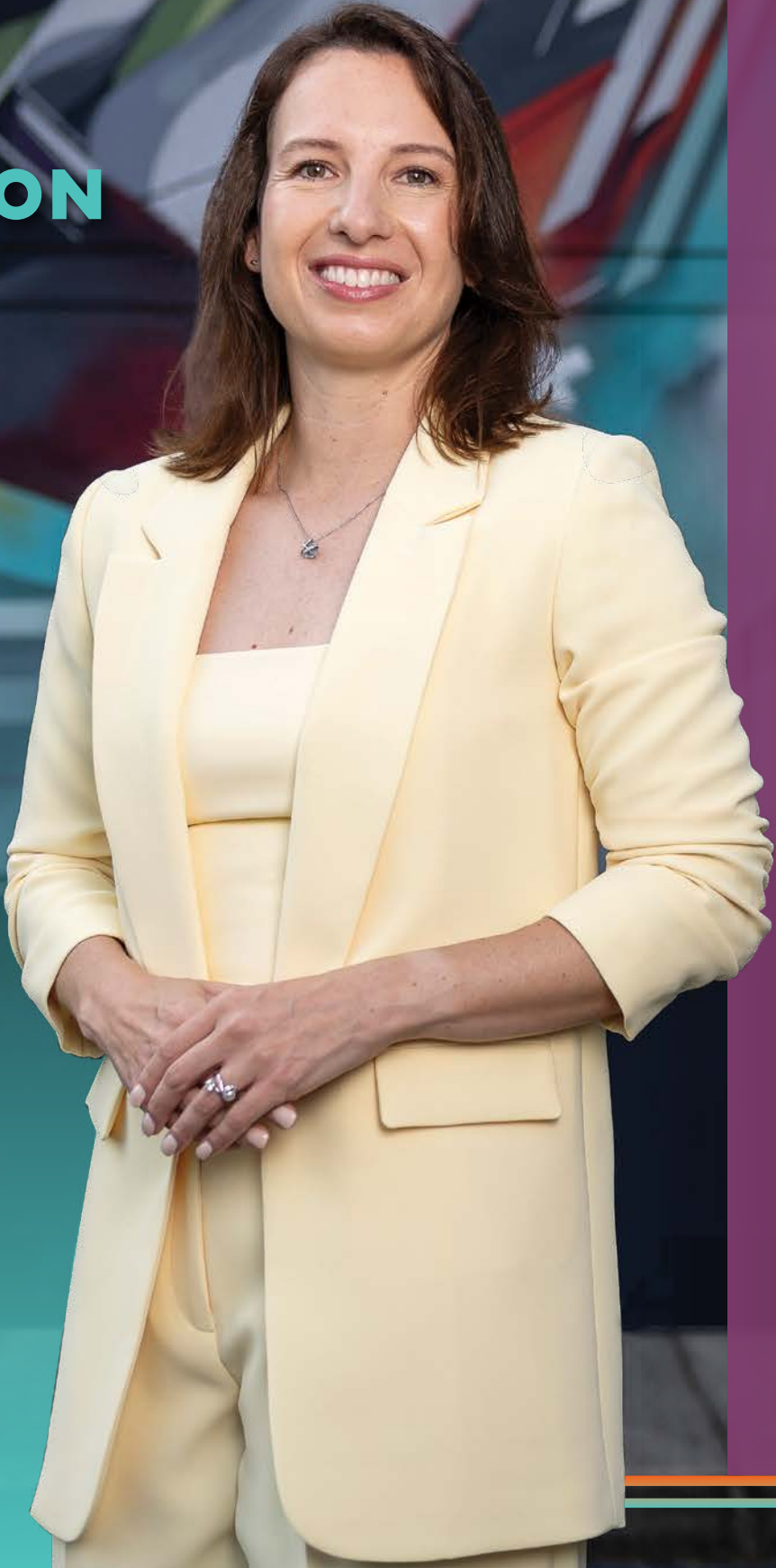
IN ACTION

BRYAN SCHOOL PROFESSOR TURNS CURIOSITY INTO CAPABILITY

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DR. MARKETA RICKLEY
Assistant Professor

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Imagine getting a sneak peek into how company leadership will react to your presentation, so you can perfect your slide deck before walking into the boardroom. Or having a chance to practice a sales call with a world-class expert before making your pitch to a client. Generative AI makes these concepts possible, and Dr. Marketa Rickley wants to ensure area businesses take full advantage of the technology. She has developed a practical, hands-on workshop to help business leaders apply generative AI, and the class is taking off.

“Everyone is talking about AI,” says Rickley, an assistant professor of management in the Bryan School of Business and Economics. “But do business and industry leaders in our community have the necessary tools to get started? There’s often a gap between reading about AI and being able to implement it.”

Closing the Gap with Hands-On Learning

In fact, a recent report from McKinsey & Company confirms that while 78% of companies are using AI in at least one of their business functions, applying it across multiple functions or integrating it fully is much less common. This is especially true in smaller companies.

Rickley hopes to improve this statistic through hour-long workshops she designed for the business community. The online classes showcase 10 diverse case studies for how people can use AI in their daily work, including to:

- Draft emails, employee surveys, or job descriptions
- Prepare for meetings
- Generate sales scripts
- Develop employee training modules
- Write ad copy, social media posts, and podcasts
- Generate new ideas or approaches
- Suggest improvements to projects in development

“There are a lot of things we do every day that can be done much more efficiently,” Rickley says. “My goal is to inspire companies about the possibilities generative AI offers, so they can then customize this tool for their specific needs. Once I show a few things people can try, it seems the Band-Aid is ripped off, and there’s no more trepidation.”

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A Breakthrough for Business Leaders

That was exactly the case when Rickley presented her workshop to the 25-member leadership team of Skyla Credit Union, a \$1.7 billion financial institution with 20 branches across North Carolina and California.

The company had seen other AI presentations previously, but they focused more on specialized technology than on practical applications, says Ray Crouse, the president of Skyla Financial Solutions and a member of the Bryan School Advisory Board.

“Everyone just saw AI as a mystery, and people were not really embracing it or trying to use it,” Crouse says. But Rickley’s session helped to convey useful, real-world applications. And with hands-on access to the prompts, attendees worked right alongside the instructor, realizing just how intuitive the tool could be.

“Our leadership team is getting more and more comfortable with AI now, and we’ve seen an uptick in this group using ChatGPT and CoPilot,” Crouse says. “By adjusting her presentation to include exercises that were relevant to our industry, she helped erase a lot of fears.”

Rickley has since offered the workshop to a wide variety of companies across the banking, construction, and agricultural industries, and recently, she was invited to present to a national conference of credit unions.

The sessions have the added benefit of offering her direct insight into what business leaders need from AI, challenges with its use, and awareness of how it can create value, Rickley says. This helps inform her strategic management curricula in the undergraduate and MBA programs at the Bryan School, where she received the 2022 Teaching Excellence Award. “I take these learnings right back to my classroom,” she says. “It’s a wonderful symbiosis.”

Linking Industry and Academia

In addition to her work with generative AI, Rickley is also studying predictive AI, particularly how machine learning can help predict leader emergence in teams. Her work has been published in scholarly publications, including the Journal of Management and the Global Strategy Journal, and she has been recognized by the Academy of Management with several research awards, including an International Management Division Best Paper Award and the Emerald Best International Dissertation Award.

“One of the pillars of our strategic plan at the Bryan School is to not only disseminate knowledge with our students but also to share our expertise with businesses in our community,” Rickley says. “That inspired me to consider how we could help lower the barriers to AI use in our region, and it ended up being quite effective.” ■