INFORMS Practice Section Newsletter – January 2026

A Message from the 2026 INFORMS Practice Section President

By Patricia Neri, Intelligent Analytics Solutions, LLC; patricianerib@gmail.com



It is an honor to serve as your 2026 President. For more than twenty years, the Practice Section has been my professional home. Attending the Edelman Award presentations as a doctoral student, confirmed my interest in being a practitioner.

Over the years, INFORMS has continually reinforced my belief that analytics can make a meaningful difference in the world - a belief shared by our 2026 officers Rajeev Namboothiri (VP), Nitish Umang (Secretary), and Sharon Arroyo (Treasurer).

We extend our sincere thanks to our outgoing officers—Rajesh Tyagi, Zohar Strinka, and Yanni Papadakis—for their leadership over the past two years. We remain dedicated to building on the solid foundation you have advanced.

Our commitment is to support members throughout their careers with learning, connection, and community. We'll continue offering webinars, networking, mentoring, and collaborative opportunities through our newsletter. We encourage you to explore playlists related to the Edelman Award, Wagner Prize, and UPS Smith Prize, available on the INFORMS YouTube Channel: https://www.youtube.com/@INFORMSonline/playlists.

Exciting news is on the horizon: we'll soon announce two new Practice Section awards, building on the initiative launched by past President Rajesh Tyagi and advanced by board members Ann Bixby, Pelin Pekgun, Jiaxi Zhu, and John Milne.

We are excited to deepen our engagement with our student members. Students are encouraged to contribute to our "Student Corner" or "Early Career Practitioner Corner" (up to 250 words) with your experiences, opinions, or opportunities. Please send your articles to our new Newsletter editor, Hongsheng Zhong, at hzhong@ups.com. Upcoming volunteer opportunities, including industry liaison roles, will be posted in Connect https://connect.informs.org/practice/home.

Past President, INFORMS Section on Practice

By Rajesh Tyagi, GE Research (Retired); rajeshtyagi@yahoo.com



This past year as President of the INFORMS Practice Section has been deeply rewarding. I continue to be impressed by the dedication and energy of our active members, especially given the modest size of our group. While we may not yet have the numbers to qualify as a Society, we more than make up for it through the quality and breadth of our initiatives. These include stewarding the Edelman Award, Wagner Prize, and the UPS Smith Prize competitions; organizing practice-focused sessions at the INFORMS Annual Meeting; publishing newsletters for our members; and hosting engaging webinars that reach both our membership and the wider practice community. We also organize the Edelman Gala, where the achievements and impact of practice prizes are celebrated with great enthusiasm.

Equally important is recognizing the contributions of our members. Beginning in 2026, we will proudly present two awards that highlight their outstanding efforts: the Distinguished Practitioner Award, and the Service Award.

As I transition into the role of Immediate Past President, I look forward to continuing my service alongside an outstanding executive team: President Patricia Neri, Vice President Rajeev Namboothiri, Secretary Nitish Umang, and Treasurer Sharon Arroyo.

Updates from the INFORMS VP Practice

By Robin Lougee, IBM Research (Retired), KnitWell Group (Former); robin.lougee@gmail.com



Quiz time! Can you guess what the most frequently asked question from members was during my just-completed, four-year tenure as your VP Practice on the INFORMS Board?

The #1 question is: "*how do I get involved*?"

It's interesting. As a member-driven professional society, there's no shortage of volunteer opportunities at INFORMS. We have "one-and-done" micro-volunteering tasks that take less than an hour that help move larger initiatives forward, to multi-year committee roles -- and everything in between. A challenge is how to make all the different needs for volunteers visible in a timely and efficient way.

Welcome to the new **INFORMS Volunteer Portal** at https://connect.informs.org/volunteeropportunities/i-volunteer. Now leaders have a place to post their open needs for volunteers, and would-be volunteers have a one-stop shop to see where help is needed and find a good fit. Looking for people to help you? You're no longer limited to your own network. With the INFORMS Volunteer Portal, you now have an easy way to advertise your volunteer opening to the entire 12,000+ INFORMS Membership.

I'm a convert after seeing how well the Volunteer Portal worked to find new talent for my *Committee on Industry-Academia Collaboration*. Plus, I enjoy discovering new activities happening across INFORMS, like the INFORMS Reddit Champions initiative. Who knew?! So, whether you're looking to find volunteers or find volunteering opportunities to grow professionally, I encourage you to check it out.

This is my last Practice Section newsletter update as INFORMS VP Practice. It's been an honor to serve you, and I'm so proud of everything we learned and accomplished. As of January 1, 2026 we have a new VP Practice, Pooja Dewan – our former Practice Section President! Please join me in congratulating Pooja in her new role. I can't wait to see how we grow and evolve under Pooja's leadership with your support.

Updates from the Edelman Award Committee Chair

By Irv Lustig, Optimization Principal, Princeton Consultants irv@princeton.com



We are gearing up for a great 2026 Franz Edelman Award Competition at the INFORMS Analytics+ Conference in National Harbor this spring. The competition will take place on Monday, April 13, and will recognize the best work in the use of operations research, management science, and advanced analytics in practice.

The competition began in the summer of 2025 with a call for entries. A large selection committee composed of practitioners and academics narrowed the field down to 12 semifinalists. Each semifinalist underwent a thorough verification process to ensure that the claims about their work could be substantiated.

From the group of semifinalists, six finalists were chosen:

- Chewy
- Department of Food and Public Distribution (DFPD), India
- ECCO Shoes
- Google
- Microsoft
- Nvidia

Each team will make a presentation before a judging panel consisting of nine judges. All are invited to come to the competition and watch the presentations. The winner will give a reprise at the Annual Meeting in November 2026. We look forward to seeing all the Edelman fans at the contest in April!

More information about each of the finalists can be found in the INFORMS Press Release announcing the finalists at https://www.informs.org/News-Room/INFORMS-Releases/Awards-Releases/INFORMS-Names-Six-Finalists-for-the-2026-Franz-Edelman-Award-the-World-s-Leading-Honor-in-Analytics-Operations-Research-and-Management-Science

Updates from the Wagner Prize Chair

By Konstantina Mellou, Microsoft Research; kmellou@microsoft.com



We recently wrapped up another very successful year for the Wagner Prize! This prize is awarded annually by INFORMS to recognize and reward quality and coherence of analysis used in practice, good writing, strong analytical content, and verifiable practice successes. This award, given in memory of the late Daniel H. Wagner, was established by a generous endowment from the firms Metron, Inc.; Daniel H. Wagner, Associates, Inc.; and Applied Mathematics, Inc.

This year we had four impressive finalist teams. Each team gave a presentation of their work during the INFORMS Annual Meeting in Atlanta. The 2025 Wagner Prize winner is "**Rebalancing and Pricing of near-Expiry Inventory in Online Grocery Retail**" by Long He, Ziyuan Zhou,

Zhengling Qi from George Washington University, and Guangrui Ma, Yuanbo Peng, Yushu Yao, Zhongyi Zha, Mingyong Zhao, and Zhenyu Zhuo from Meituan Group.

The winning team will be recognized at the Edelman Gala during the 2026 INFORMS Analytics+ Conference in April. The team will also reprise its Wagner presentation during this conference.

For an opportunity to get your own work recognized, keep an eye out for this year's Wagner Prize application deadline around May 2026!

INFORMS Practice Section Webinar Series

By Rajesh Tyagi, GE Research (Retired); rajeshtyagi@yahoo.com



The Practice Section has been conducting a webinar series that showcases (1) individual analytics applications and (2) panels on areas such as recruiting and training analytics professionals and managing analytics projects.

Our recent webinars include:

- GenAI & Your Career: Navigating Shifts, Skills, and Opportunities
- Delighting a Billion Indian Customers through Supply Chain Optimization at Flipkart (2025 Edelman Finalist)
- Data-driven Optimization of Ferro Alloys Usage In Steelmaking at JSW (India)

Those interested in learning about upcoming webinars should check out our webpage at: https://connect.informs.org/practice/events/upcoming-webinars. And those interested in viewing past webinars can find them at: https://connect.informs.org/practice/events/past-webinars.

If anyone is interested in giving a webinar or has suggestions for a speaker or topic, please contact Rajesh Tyagi (rajeshtyagi@yahoo.com).

A New Opportunity to Support the Daniel H. Wagner Prize

By Allen Butler, Daniel H. Wagner Associates, Inc.; Allen.Butler@va.wagner.com



As you know, the Practice Sections sponsors and manages the Daniel H. Wagner Prize for Excellence in the Practice of Advanced Analytics and Operations Research (see https://www.informs.org/Recognizing-Excellence/Wagner-Prize for details).

The Wagner Prize was endowed in 1998 by 3 companies, Applied Mathematics, Metron, and my own company, Daniel H. Wagner Associates. The fund has grown through the years partially by contributions from INFORMS members and others. However, it has always been difficult to direct any contributions to the fund – no more!

I am pleased to announce that INFORMS recently updated the donation section of their website (https://www.informs.org/Donate) so as to allow donors to direct their donations to

specific funds. Near the bottom of the donation page, under Endowed Funds, you can now select the Daniel Wagner Prize Fund for your donation.

I encourage everyone to utilize this new feature to help one of our premier prizes to grow.

The Importance of Validation when Incorporating GenAI with Decision Making

By Segev Wasserkrug, IBM Research; segevw@il.ibm.com



Generative AI (GenAI) offers significant potential to accelerate and broaden the application of OR/MS and analytics in decision-making. Its uses include generating optimization models from natural language descriptions and providing intuitive interfaces for decision makers to query models, interpret outputs, and perform what-if analyses.

However, as any experienced practitioner knows, a vital part of applying OR/MS and analytics in a trustworthy and ethical manner to decision making is to validate that the analytical models provide reliable and valuable outputs consistent with the real-world decision-making problem. Traditionally, practitioners ensured that analytical models accurately represented real-world problems and produced reliable results. However, the usage of GenAI introduces new challenges to this process. Examples of this include:

- During what-if analysis, a decision maker might use an LLM interface to add or remove constraints without involving an optimization expert. How can they confirm that the change reflects the intended meaning and captures all necessary nuances?
- An inexperienced modeler can use an LLM to create a full optimization model from a natural language description, but validating its correctness in terms of it capturing the real-world objective and constraints may be difficult for such a modeler. Even asking the LLM for an explanation may not help, as this could yield incorrect yet highly convincing responses.
- Decision makers may bypass modelling entirely and rely on GenAI-generated recommendations. This approach is especially risky because such outputs are not based on an established, formal model, but, rather, on probabilistic text generation.

These challenges must be addressed to fully realize GenAI's benefits for decision-making while maintaining trustworthiness and value. Although comprehensive validation solutions are still evolving, and some are the subject of academic research, there are already some approaches which may provide at least some level of validation. For example, GenAI could generate an alternative formal representation—such as a Python program that, given a solution, computes the objective value and verifies constraint satisfaction. Another approach is introducing a "GenAI critic," a separate model tasked with validating the outputs of the model-generation GenAI. Regardless of the technical solution, the first step is awareness: educating both practitioners and decision makers about these risks and the need for robust and comprehensive validation strategies tailored to decision making workflows incorporating GenAI.

Why ECPN Matters: Mentorship, Growth, and Community

By Subramanian Narayanaswamy, 2026 ECPN Chair; snsubbu@gmail.com



Starting in analytics can feel like entering a field that is both exciting and overwhelming. Many of us have a solid background in technical training, models, data, and code, but we quickly realize that career growth depends on more than technical skills alone.

From the beginning, we often wonder: How do I communicate my work effectively? How do I build confidence in my profession? How can I connect with mentors and peers who can guide me? These are real challenges, and they also explain why the Early Career Professionals' Network (ECPN) remains such a meaningful part of the INFORMS community.

ECPN has supported early-career professionals for two decades by emphasizing skills that are often not formally taught but are essential in the workplace. I had the chance to get involved earlier in my career, and what stayed with me the most was not just a single session but the entire experience, the mentorship, encouragement, and opportunity to learn from professionals who generously shared their time and advice. Such exposure can broaden your perspective on your career and the kinds of impact you can make in analytics.

ECPN is designed for recent and soon-to-be graduates, as well as early-career professionals in analytics and operations research. The program is intentionally practical and interactive. You're not just listening to presentations; you're actively building professional skills and forming connections.

ECPN 2026 will carry on this tradition by offering hands-on role-playing cases, speed mentoring sessions with senior practitioners, an elevator speech workshop to sharpen professional presence, and structured networking to help participants forge relationships that extend beyond the conference. Attendees will have the chance to meet others at similar career stages, learn together, and often stay connected long after the event.

As the analytics field quickly evolves with AI, GenAI, automation, and new tools, one principle remains steady: those who succeed in the long run combine technical excellence with communication, leadership, and strong professional networks. ECPN exists to help accelerate that growth.

Join Us for ECPN 2026 - INFORMS Analytics+ Conference

- **Date:** Sunday, April 12, 2026
- **Location:** Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center, National Harbor, MD
- https://meetings.informs.org/wordpress/analytics/

If you are interested in attending the next ECPN or know someone who could benefit from this unique opportunity, consider applying or nominating a candidate for the 2026 program. For more information, email ecpn@mail.informs.org.

Congratulations to Surya Gundavarapu

Data4Good isn't just for students, it's for you!

By Matthew A. Lanham, Butler University; malanham@gmail.com



This February marks the fourth year of the National Data4Good Analytics Competition, co-sponsored by INFORMS and other partners. Data4Good was created to help close the gap between what universities sometimes teach and what graduates need to succeed in practice. Participants build job-ready capabilities aligned with the Certified Analytics Professional (CAP) ecosystem, including the INFORMS Analytics Framework, business problem framing, and hands-on technical upskilling through Python, SAS, and a free six-month DataCamp subscription.

A signature feature of the competition is the Microsoft AI-900 Artificial Intelligence training and certification pathway, which participants can complete for only $27, compared to the $99 exam cost typically paid outside the competition. Students apply these skills to a "good" case through a points-based format that rewards both learning and performance.

This year's challenge asked teams to predict whether large language models would produce truthful, semi-truthful, or false responses given specific prompts and context—an increasingly relevant issue as generative AI enters everyday workflows. Importantly, Data4Good is not only for students. We introduced a practitioner track this year, and Surya Gundavarapu—an INFORMS Practice Section member—won the division. When we asked Surya about the competition he noted, "I hope others in our community take on challenges like this—not for the prize, but for the learning. Competitions like Data4Good force you to move beyond tutorials and actually solve something."

As we plan 2026, I hope you'll consider Data4Good as part of your own professional development.

Networking Happy Hour

By Zohar Strinka, Principal Consultant, Analytics Strategies; zstrinka@gmail.com

By Kathryn Walter, Avista; kathryn.walter@avistacorp.com





Over the past year we have enjoyed hosting the Practice Section Networking Happy Hour. We went into the year with a goal to help our community connect with more analytics professionals.

To close out our term as hosts, we wanted to share our guiding principles for future organizers. Thinking about the outcomes we are trying to achieve is core to what we do in INFORMS.

Since our key goal was to help our community connect, we first needed to define what that would mean. We determined that connection meant conversations between analytics professionals. Then we needed to get into the details. Following the 5 W's, we tweaked the Networking Happy Hour to match:

Why: To create connections within our community.

Who: Analytics professionals. This group is a rather large variety of people, and we wanted to include all levels of experience and education and all levels of interest in INFORMS or the Practice Section. We wanted anyone who showed up to fit into the conversations.

What: Dialogue between analytics professionals. We curated a list of topics that could help start and sustain a conversation across the diverse group. A lot of our topics had to do with learning: How can we communicate better, collaborate better, work better, and learn better?

When: The last Friday of each month at 5pm ET (or the second to last Friday if the last one conflicted with a holiday). We looked at the calendar at the beginning of 2025 and picked all the dates for the year. We chose the time as one we thought would work well for most people and would definitely work for us as the organizers. We also choose each month's theme upfront, making many of them seasonal.

Where: Zoom. People were able to join from all over. As hosts, we were able to use breakout rooms and remove any note-taking bots that showed up.

How: Zoom breakout rooms. For each round, we gave conversation starters based on the month's theme and sent people to randomly-assigned rooms for a set amount of time. The rooms gave people the opportunities for small-group discussions with both old and new connections. Our boilerplate intro at each happy hour reminded folks they could go back to the main room at any time for any reason. One of us would stay in the main room to be ready to reassign people to rooms and greet latecomers. We iterated to figure out "how much time is good for an initial conversation… while keeping the suffering short when conversation slows." We settled on 12 minutes per session. We reassigned rooms for each session and did what we could to prevent anyone from accidentally talking to the same person every round.

Feel free to reach out if you have any questions. Wishing you all the best in 2026!