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**catalyst**

# THE ECOSYSTEM EFFECT WHY COLLABORATION IS KEY

TO ILLINOIS' INNOVATION GROWTH



ILLINOIS SCIENCE &  
TECHNOLOGY COALITION





## **catalyst conversations:**

# **THE ECOSYSTEM EFFECT – WHY COLLABORATION IS KEY TO ILLINOIS’ INNOVATION GROWTH**

Innovation in Illinois is evolving.

It’s no longer only about breakthroughs in laboratories or the latest startup acquisition. Today, innovation is about the systems that make those wins possible—the relationships, resources, programs, and shared environments that allow new ideas to take root and grow. The future of innovation in Illinois will depend not just on what we invent, but on how well we collaborate.

This is the ecosystem effect—a model where innovation is built not in isolation, but through intentional connection across people, institutions, and industries.

Illinois has long been a powerhouse of innovation. With world-renowned universities, national laboratories, corporate headquarters, and an increasingly vibrant entrepreneurial scene, the state has the ingredients. But in an economy defined by complexity, speed, and interdependence, ingredients aren’t enough. The question is: how well do we mix them?

## **MOVING FROM SILOS TO SYSTEMS**

The term “ecosystem” is often used casually in innovation circles. But in a truly collaborative system, different sectors don’t just coexist—they complement and challenge one another. Universities produce the research. Entrepreneurs commercialize it. Corporations scale it. Policymakers shape the environment. Philanthropy fills in the gaps. And community organizations help ensure equity and access.

Yet too often, these players operate in silos—disconnected by bureaucracy, competition, or a lack of shared language. The result? Missed opportunities, duplicated efforts, and fragmented impact.



To compete in today's innovation economy, Illinois must bridge those gaps.

**“One of Illinois’ greatest strengths is its diversity of industries,”** says E.J. Reedy, founder of Intentional Gravity. **“That diversity plays directly into innovation—it gives us the opportunity to collaborate in ways that are unique and deeply cross-sector.”**

Reedy is one of a growing number of leaders who focus not on any one sector—but on the systems that connect them. Through Intentional Gravity, he works with entrepreneurs, community builders, and institutions to design ecosystems that are rooted in people, not just capital or code.

## REIMAGINING INFRASTRUCTURE FOR INNOVATION

While cities like Chicago remain vital anchors of innovation, Illinois’ future depends on looking beyond traditional tech corridors. Smaller cities, rural regions, and their institutions are increasingly key players in driving talent development, entrepreneurship, and industry innovation.

But regional innovation requires regional infrastructure—and not just roads or broadband. It needs collaborative environments: shared workspaces, accelerators, incubators, training programs, community investment funds, and cross-sector leadership groups that are built for local context.

This is especially important in a post-pandemic world, where remote work has shifted ideas about where innovation can happen.

**“The pandemic changed expectations around where innovation could happen,”** Reedy explains. **“We’ve seen new possibilities emerge in places that aren’t traditionally considered tech hubs. It’s now up to Illinois—and all of us—to integrate those shifts and take advantage of these once-in-a-generation opportunities.”**

Intentional Gravity’s approach is based on cultivating innovation through connection and belonging. Through Quiet Cohorts™ and other curated



## E.J. Reedy

FOUNDER AND CEO OF INTENTIONAL GRAVITY AND STRATEGIC ADVISOR TO PORTAL INNOVATIONS

E.J. Reedy is the founder of Intentional Gravity, an organization focused on building vibrant, people-powered innovation ecosystems. With over two decades of experience across economic development, philanthropy, academia, and venture capital, E.J. has led efforts at institutions like the Kauffman Foundation, the University of Chicago’s Polsky Center, and Portal Innovations. His work has supported global entrepreneurship research, life sciences ecosystem growth, and the creation of collaborative programs that help innovators thrive.

Through Intentional Gravity, E.J. helps clients across sectors activate innovation by curating intentional experiences, supporting ecosystem leaders, and designing environments that foster sustainable growth. Based in Chicago, he is committed to shaping inclusive and resilient innovation communities across Illinois and beyond.



create space for innovators to engage in deeper reflection, build trust, and unlock collaboration that's authentic—not transactional.

**“Gravity is that feeling that draws you in—you want to be part of a community, even if you don't know why,” he says. “Our job is to create the conditions where that happens—through presence, trust, and intentionality.”**

## THE MIDDLE MATTERS

When we talk about innovation, the focus is often on “firsts”—first rounds of funding, first product launches, first hires. But thriving ecosystems are not built only on beginnings. They're built on continuity.

Reedy calls this the “middle”—the messy, uncertain stage of growth between startup and scale, between idea and impact. It's where support often falls away. And yet, it's where ecosystems can make the biggest difference.

**“We focus too much on early-stage success and don't measure the ‘middle’ enough—how people stay connected, how they grow, what talent is being retained or developed,” he says. “Growth-stage companies and ecosystem builders often feel isolated. We need metrics that capture that middle journey—not just the launch.”**

This shift in perspective requires more than just new metrics—it requires a mindset change. It means investing in long-term outcomes, not just quick wins. And it means celebrating ecosystem health alongside economic outputs.

## BUILDING ECOSYSTEMS IS PEOPLE WORK

There's a growing recognition across the state—and the country—that the most effective innovation doesn't come from lone visionaries. It comes from ecosystems that foster trust, risk-taking, and long-term alignment.

**“There's too much emphasis on space as a solution,” he says. “Pitch events aren't enough. We need layered support structures—cohorts, programming, and development opportunities for**

**everyone—from early-stage founders to scientists and executives.”**

Building healthy ecosystems takes time, care, and emotional labor—what Reedy calls “ecosystem activation.”

Intentional Gravity's work reflects that approach. For example, their Quiet Cohorts™ offer founders and ecosystem leaders space to connect intentionally across industries. Intentional Gravity's other programs are designed to help innovation leaders reflect on their roles, develop stronger peer relationships, and build support systems that last beyond a single event or funding cycle.

Outside of Intentional Gravity, programs like mHUB's HardTech Development initiative in Chicago are also contributing to this ecosystem activation by offering tailored support, equipment access, and technical mentorship for startups in advanced manufacturing—bridging the gap between innovation and commercialization at the ground level.

These efforts don't compete with other organizations' work—they complement it. Intentional Gravity's model helps amplify and connect existing infrastructure, creating stronger, more durable outcomes by focusing on the people who hold innovation systems together.

## FROM FRAGMENTED TO CONNECTED

Innovation systems thrive when people, institutions, and ideas work in sync. Through decades of work across Illinois and with global institutions like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank, Reedy has seen the high cost of fragmentation—whether between regions, sectors, or within teams.

**“We can't build outward if we're disconnected inside,” he says.**

For Illinois, the challenge—and opportunity—is to invest in the connective tissue: trust between institutions, support for mid-career professionals, and a long-term commitment to the people who sustain innovation ecosystems every day.

**“Illinois has always had a mindset of rebuilding,” Reedy notes. “That spirit of reinvention is exactly what makes this state a great place to grow an ecosystem—if we choose to nurture it.”**

This echoes across the strongest innovation environments worldwide: when people feel a sense of belonging, ecosystems flourish.

**“Success,” Reedy says, “is the creation of gravity. It’s when someone doesn’t just attend an event, but joins a community. It’s when people build something here not because they have to, but because they want to.”**

Connection isn’t just a value—it’s a strategy. By investing in the people who build bridges—often quietly and behind the scenes with care, consistency, and intention—we create innovative environments that are both functional and magnetic. When we focus on trust and engagement over transactions, and design around relationships that hold ecosystems together, Illinois has the opportunity to lead not only in innovation outputs, but in how innovation is built, shared, and sustained across every community.

**“As we’ve seen in ecosystems around the world, it’s not always the flashiest efforts that matter most,” he says. “It’s the consistency of showing up, making room for others, and holding space for shared growth that builds lasting impact.”**

In a time when innovation can feel scattered or short-lived, Illinois has a chance to model something different: a connected, resilient ecosystem shaped by trust, designed for inclusion, and built to last.

# A call to action

So, what does it take to harness the ecosystem effect?

It takes redefining success—not just in terms of capital raised or patents filed, but in relationships built, talent retained, and regional progress made. It takes investing in middle-stage companies, community-based innovation, and the people who keep the ecosystem humming quietly behind the scenes. It means embedding collaboration not just into projects—but into policies, budgets, and everyday practices.

And it takes recognizing that no one sector or region can go it alone.

Illinois has the tools, the talent, and the tenacity to lead the next wave of inclusive innovation. Leadership will emerge from the ability to build lasting relationships, foster inclusive environments, and empower a culture of shared accountability. It will come from those who listen before leading, connect across boundaries, and commit to the long-term work of growing together. When collaboration becomes the fabric of how we operate—not just a strategy, but a daily practice—we create ecosystems where innovation isn’t the exception; it’s the expectation.

That’s the ecosystem effect. And it’s already taking root across the state.

E.J. Reedy is a natural catalyst for collaboration in Illinois’ innovation ecosystem. ISTC is fortunate to have him as not only a Board Member, but a partner in all that we do. “Intentional Gravity” is the perfect descriptor for how thoughtfully he convenes people and exemplifies ISTC’s mantra of “idea to impact.”

Thank you, E.J.!



**Kate Calabra**  
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