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Spotlight on Chicago's Tech Scene

By Dawn Reiss

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Silicon Valley is known as the biggest technology haven in the U.S., but Chicago has rapidly grown in the past few years, as a tech startup hot spot in the Midwest. Companies to Built in Chicago, an online community of digital innovators and entrepreneurs. And in November, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel said he expects 40,000 tech jobs to be created in Chicago during the next decade to help double the city's digital-technology workforce.

"This modern movement, it's really just happened dramatically in the past three or four years," says Kevin Willer, the former CEO of Chicago Entrepreneurial Center who is now a partner at Chicago Venture Partners, a private equity investment firm that invests in seed-stage companies. For event planners, Chicago's tech boom means new event venues, innovative idea shares and a crop of new speakers for conferences in the Windy City. Here are a few ways event planners can take advantage of Chicago's burgeoning tech scene.

1. Check out local co-working spaces. Chicago is home to a number of tech incubators, or facilities designed to promote tech startups, including co-working spaces where members rent desks month to month. At 50,000 square feet, the largest and one of the most well-known co-working place in Chicago is 1871, which is run by Chicago Entrepreneurial Center. TechNexus, which Forbes called one of the top ten incubators in the U.S., is in the process of building a new 50,000 square foot location for its nearly 3,000 monthly visitors. Chicago venture capital firm Lightbank, recently opened The Warehouse, a 100-seat venue, while Catapult Chicago, which opened in 2012, has 12,000 square feet of co-working space. At these venues, you can get ideas for open-space meetings or plan an off-site creative meeting in one of them.

2. Visit Chicago's tech forums. Online communities are another great way to connect with Chicago's technology industry to get speaker ideas. Built in Chicago's robust website can help meeting planners connect with more than 18,000 Chicagoans, find out which companies are hiring, find tech events in the "hit the town" section and read other important tech community news. Planners should also look at the Chicago Business Development Forum, which helps small businesses, entrepreneurs and start-ups connect at various meetups.

3. See who's making headlines in the Chicago tech world. After creating the Illinois Innovation Council, state Governor Pat Quinn launched the Illinois Innovation Network in 2011 as place to connect startups, community leaders, academic institutions and community leaders to help build businesses. Similarly, the Chicago Innovation Awards, Illinois Technology Association's cityLIGHTS Awards and Built in Chicago's Moxie Awards recognize some of the most innovative in Chicago's tech community (in other words, top local speakers for events in Chicago).