

IRI 2026

INNOVATORS SUMMIT

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Interactive Session: Anticipating Innovation Challenges for the Future

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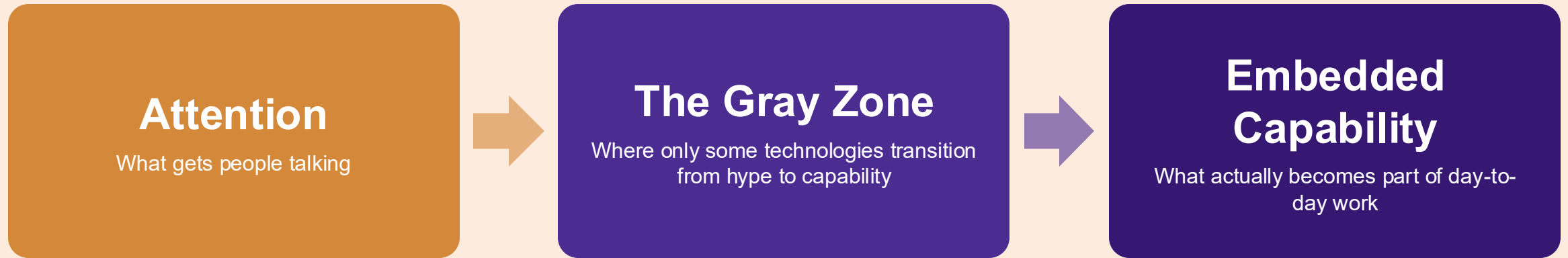




Better Understanding the Technology Hype Cycle

From Hype to Adoption

How Technologies Actually Evolve Inside Organizations



Innovation does not move in a straight line from discovery to impact.

Attention is the starting point — but adoption is the real test. Using the number of mentions each technology received in the summaries of our Digitalization and AI roundtables over the last five years, we mapped where six key technologies fall on the adoption spectrum — and how the conversation around the leading ones has evolved over time.

Source: Topic mentions from Digitalization & AI Roundtable summaries, 2022–2026

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How the Conversation Has Shifted – 2022 - 2026

Theme	Early Focus	Mid-Conversation Shift	Where the Conversation is Now
AI	<p><i>Can we use it safely?</i> Guardrails, blocking public tools, confidentiality, pilots</p>	<p><i>Can we trust it?</i> Mixed output quality, hallucinations, prompt risk, need for human review</p>	<p><i>How do we integrate it responsibly?</i> Human-in-the-loop as standard, role shifts (creator → curator), training & literacy, adoption and ROI, cultural and leadership readiness</p>
Data Governance	<p><i>Get more data, make it searchable</i> Digitization, metadata, data lakes</p>	<p><i>Data friction becomes visible</i> Ownership questions, delete vs retain, resistance to tagging, poor hygiene limiting AI</p>	<p><i>Governance as infrastructure</i> Standardization, system integration, defined ownership roles, sharing with partners; data readiness is the bottleneck</p>
Modeling & Simulation	<p><i>Models as leverage</i> Replace experiments, speed and cost gains</p>	<p><i>Trust and validation</i> Accuracy, uncertainty, confidence in outputs</p>	<p><i>Constrained by data & integration</i> Value tied to data quality and workflow integration; organizational readiness</p>

The Adoption Spectrum

HYPE

ADOPTION

Quantum

Conversation still largely about potential and horizon scanning rather than implementation

IoT & VR/AR

Initial excitement but plateau in real-world integration — usage exists but hasn't had fundamental impact

Modeling & Simulation

Practical value without dominating attention — grows through applied use rather than hype cycles

AI

From “What is it?” to “How do we integrate, govern, and measure?”

Key Insight

AI is the closest to real adoption — consistent with what we're seeing from the membership. The conversation has matured from initial exploration to questions about integration, governance, and measurable value.

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2026 Innovation Growth Drivers

Building a Future-Ready Workforce

- Developing cross-functional teams that thrive with AI and disruption
- Next generation upskilling, knowledge capture and distribution

Creating Value Through Sustainability

- Designing sustainability through the whole life cycle of a product
- Navigating regulatory shifts and uncertainty

Driving the Innovation Pipeline for Impact

- Breaking siloes to accelerate the pipeline
- Getting the right mix of projects – and measuring it
- Powering growth through open and co-innovation
- Scaling from platform innovations

Harnessing AI for Real-World Impact

- AI as an innovation accelerant
- Building talent, structure, and infrastructure foundations
- Unlocking the potential of agentic AI

Thriving Amid Disruption

- Anticipating transformation within industry and beyond
- Balancing bold innovation with the need for certainty

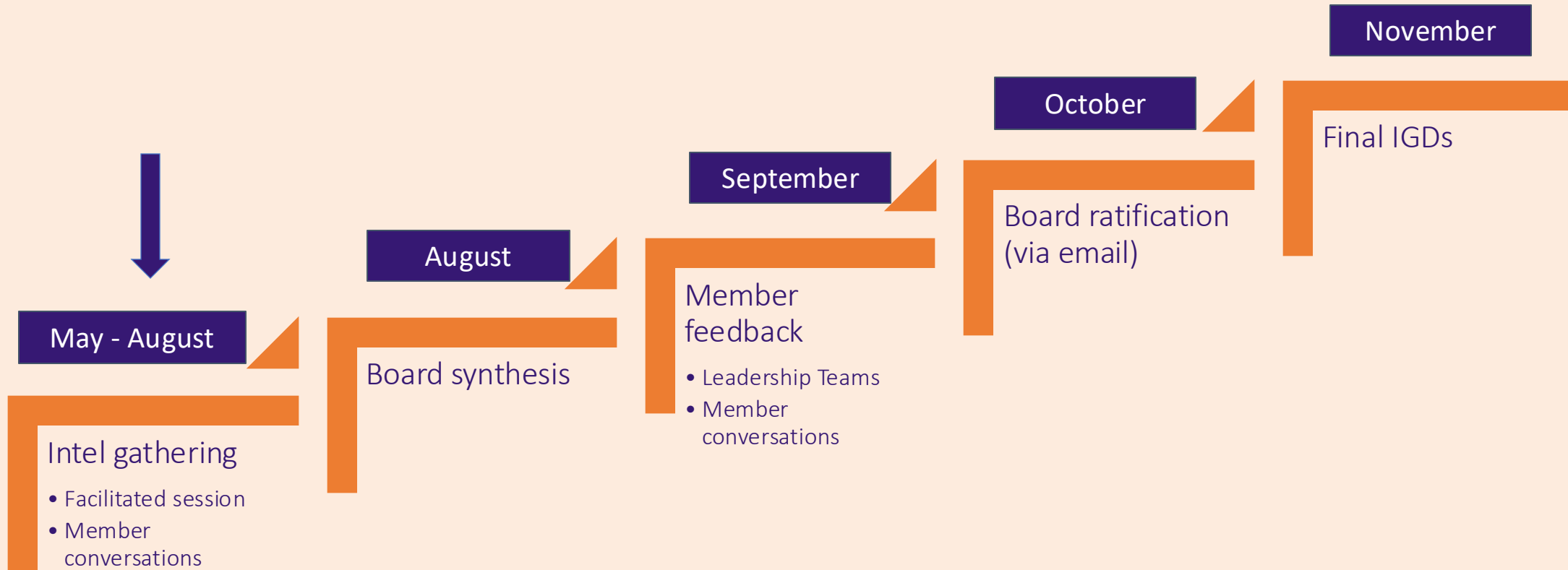
Forces shaping the next era:

① Eliminating (energy) poverty

② Inspiring US innovation competitiveness

③ Shifts in global demographics

Innovation Growth Drivers Process



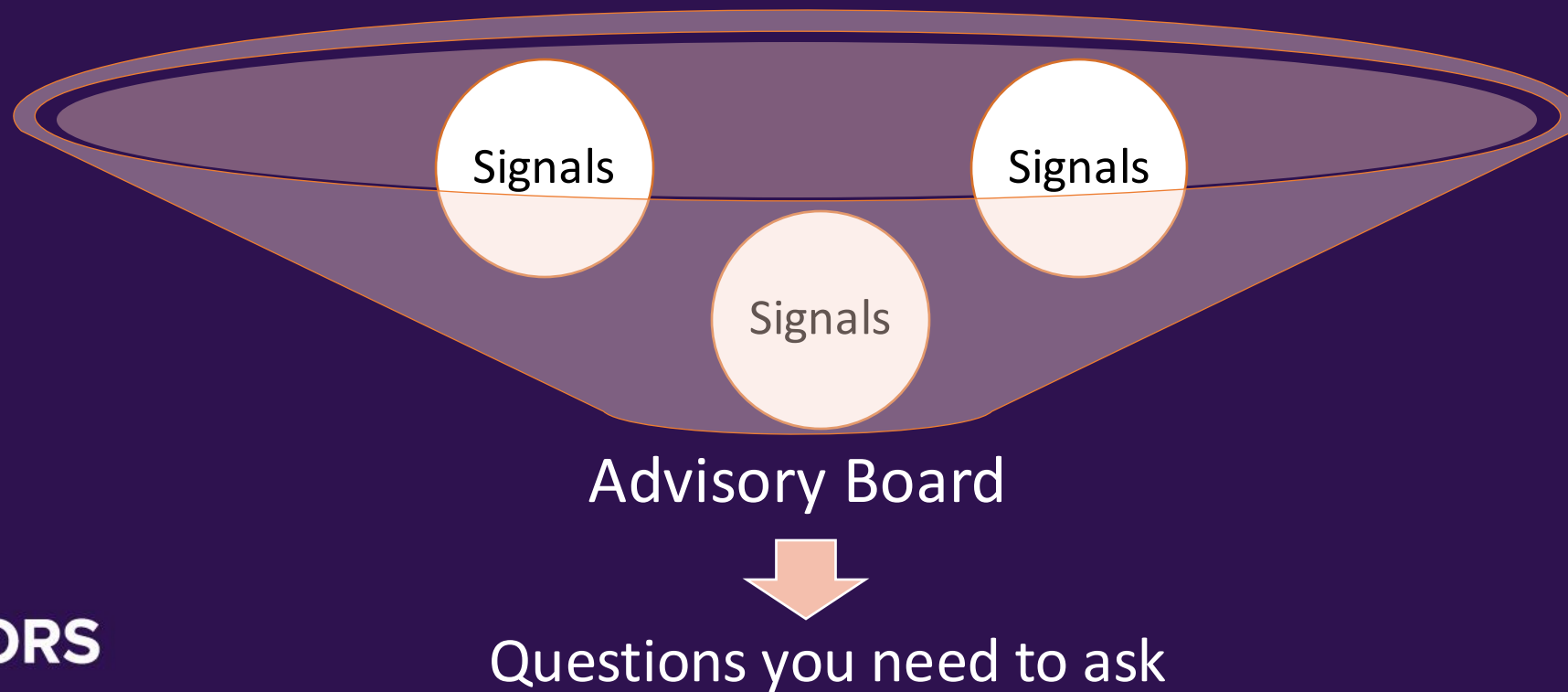
What will be
your focus in
2027?

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The Edge of What's Next: IRI's Quarterly Trends Analyer



Recent Trends

WORKPLACE SHIFTS

Will AI Make Physical Labor Obsolete?

Is Human Interaction Making a Comeback?

Gen Z at Work: Stability, Strategy, and Shifting Expectations

Return-to-Office Mandates are the New Glass Ceiling

Speak at Your Own Risk

GLOBAL AND ECONOMIC SHIFTS

Private Equity Takes Over

Heightened Immigration Enforcement is Statistically Reshaping the Labor Force

Stemming the Flow of Information

Ramifications of the K-Shaped Economy on R&D

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Questions you need to be asking:

1 HOW DO WE PLAN AND INVEST?

- ▶ What scenario planning approaches should we use to prepare for continued economic divergence and how might those scenarios influence our R&D strategy?
- ▶ Where does long-cycle, exploratory research fit within shorter investment horizons, and how do we justify it?

2 HOW DO WE ENABLE AT SCALE?

- ▶ Do we have a single, enterprise-wide understanding of data ownership, data residency, and permissible questions by region, or are compliance decisions being made as needed?
- ▶ How should R&D priorities shift to ensure products and processes are designed for automation from the outset?

3 WHAT COULD STALL MOMENTUM?

- ▶ Where do we lack visibility into labor risk across suppliers, contract manufacturers, and logistics partners —and which external dependencies will create operational disruption if staffing declines?
- ▶ Are we optimizing digital efficiency at the expense of human connection in our innovation processes?

4 HOW DO PEOPLE AND LEADERSHIP ADAPT?

- ▶ Are in-office requirements unintentionally creating a new glass ceiling by limiting flexibility for women and caregivers?
- ▶ Are we optimizing digital efficiency at the expense of human connection in our innovation processes?
- ▶ Are we designing enough entry points for new graduates?
- ▶ Are our leaders equipped to communicate with nuance, empathy, and neutrality in a polarized environment?

Top 5 Questions Activity

1. Write down the top five questions that you should be thinking about now. (e.g. How can we plan for fewer PhDs in the future? What does reduced federal funding for basic research mean for us?) – 5 minutes
2. Working with a partner, compare your five questions and then work together to come up with a list of five questions that incorporates both of your needs. – 12 minutes
3. Working with your whole table, create a list of five questions that satisfies everyone. – 15 minutes



What am I tolerating now that could become a major problem if left unchecked?

What signals or early warnings should I be paying closer attention to?

Assuming that volatility is the new normal, what do I need to do to thrive in this type of environment?

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