

2025 INNOVATORS SUMMIT – CHICAGO

HOSTED BY IRI | MAY 19–21, 2025



A premier gathering for R&D and innovation leaders, this year's Summit spotlighted transformational tools, resilient strategies, and connected ecosystems to accelerate innovation in the face of global complexity.

KEY THEMES

TRANSFORMATIONAL INNOVATION: FROM VISION TO VALUE

Pam Henderson (NewEdge) and Heather Vossler (Hormel Foods) showcased how Hormel evolved their innovation processes to a unified opportunity-based innovation model.

Takeaways:

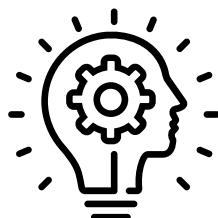
- A shared language around “opportunity” enables strategic clarity and portfolio coherence.
- Fewer, bolder initiatives tied to Horizon 2 and 3 growth can combat incremental overload.
- Alignment between innovation strategy and organizational culture is non-negotiable for growth.

DRIVING SPEED AND AGILITY THROUGH OPEN INNOVATION

RTI Innovation Advisors presented a modernized, strategic approach to OI beyond tech scouting, stressing relationships and ecosystems as critical enablers.

Takeaways:

- OI success demands “ambidexterity”—balancing exploration and execution.
- Internal silos, unclear incentives, and weak connection structures remain persistent barriers.
- Mapping partners across the innovation lifecycle helps identify capability gaps and collaboration opportunities.



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AI-POWERED BUSINESS MODELS IN R&D

Albert Invent's session revealed how digitizing R&D can unlock speed, productivity, and even net-new business models.

Case Highlights

- Henkel centralized global R&D and cut testing timelines from weeks to same-day.
- Applied Molecules slashed formulation time from 3 months to 2 days using AI.
- Nouryon's AI Sales Agent reshaped how customers interact with chemical suppliers.

DEFENSE-GRADE INNOVATION: DARPA'S FUTURE-FOCUSED MODEL

Andrew Detor (DARPA) showcased groundbreaking approaches to materials and manufacturing, including the METALS program and autonomous materials research.

Key Insights:

- Integrating materials science directly into design workflows can radically compress R&D timelines.
- Additive manufacturing and real-time qualification could redefine production at scale.
- DARPA's SURGE and INTACT programs push the frontier in part reliability and ceramic durability.

LEADERSHIP IN A TIME OF DISRUPTION

The CTO Forum tackled the complexity of innovating through ambiguity—climate risk, geopolitical instability, and digital threats.

Top Challenges Identified:

- Lack of common language and frameworks for navigating uncertainty
- Inflexible governance structures and risk-averse cultures
- Gaps in internal capability to balance bold bets with sustainable delivery

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