FUTURE READY INNOVATION TOUR OF OHIO 2026

INNOVATION RESEARCH INTERCHANGE
Accelerating Value Creation
A division of the National Association of Manufacturers

TOUR NOTES AND FINDINGS

In August, the Innovation Research Interchange's Future Ready Innovation Tour of Ohio brought manufacturing R&D professionals, higher education partners and innovation stakeholders together across the state. IRI Executive Director Lee Green was joined by TOPPAN Packaging Americas Chief Technology Officer Laura Buen Abad, James Hardie Chief Technology Officer Joe Liu and Michelman Chief Operations and Sustainability Officer Portia Yarborough for conversations across the state about the capabilities manufacturers will need to compete in a faster-paced, AI-enabled and globally connected world. With its combination of leading companies, higher education institutions, regional partners and applied innovation, Ohio offers a powerful cross-section of the U.S. manufacturing innovation ecosystem—and an ideal setting for the IRI's first Innovation Tour.

The tour highlighted findings from the IRI's Future R&D Capabilities Study and launched the next phase of the project. The study focuses on the key skills and capabilities that R&D teams will need in the medium term (five to seven years from now) as they navigate rapid technological change, workforce shifts and increasing global competition.

Among the findings, future-ready R&D teams will need to:

- Operate as a dynamic network rather than a fixed structure;
- Combine internal expertise with external partnerships to accelerate learning and value creation; and
- Use speed, adaptability and the ability to orchestrate across boundaries to create competitive advantage.

The findings make clear that future-ready R&D will depend on more than technical expertise alone. As innovation work becomes more networked and AI-enabled, professionals must connect across functions and translate technical expertise into business value. Soft skills such as communication and collaboration emerge as essential differentiators of effective teams.

The study identified the top 10 attributes of the manufacturing R&D organization of the future:

Skills/Capabilities	Ranking
Communication and Relationship Building	1
Business Acumen and Strategic Insight	2
Systems Thinking and Integration	3
Cross-Functional Collaboration and Co-Creation	=4
AI and Digital Fluency	=4
Continuous Learning and Curiosity	=4
Resilience and Change Navigation	7
Adaptability and Agile Execution	=8
Influence Without Authority	=8
Knowledge Integration and Reuse	10

Building these capabilities will require the IRI to work closely with industry, higher education and professional development providers. Ohio's rich innovation ecosystem provided an ideal place to share these findings and kick off the next phase of the study, focused on turning this diagnosis into practical recommendations for building the next generation of R&D teams.

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ON THE GROUND WITH OHIO'S INNOVATORS

The tour gave participants a firsthand look at the diversity of Ohio's manufacturing innovation landscape, from advanced R&D labs and product testing environments to full-scale production floors and consumer insight studios:

- Energizer's R&D Center showed how deep technical expertise and rigorous testing continue to drive innovation in batteries, lighting and auto care.
- Lubrizol offered a look at the advanced analytical capabilities and application-specific testing needed to compete across evolving mobility markets.
- Honda Americas demonstrated how automation, skilled production teams and long-term workforce development are shaping the future of advanced manufacturing.
- Michelman showed how co-inventing with customers early in the product life cycle can drive advances in digital printing and seed coatings.
- Kao's SoZo Studio brought that customer-centered approach to life through consumer insights, product experimentation and brand innovation across brands such as Jergens and Bioré.

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Taken together, the visits reinforced a central theme of the tour: future-ready R&D will require stronger connections across technology, talent, partners, customers and markets.

MOBILIZING THE INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM

The tour also engaged the broader innovation ecosystem through experiences designed to translate the Future R&D Capabilities Study into practical conversations and action. During hands-on Growth Signals workshops, participants explored how AI can reshape innovation processes, from research and customer discovery to competitive analysis. That exercise reinforced a key theme in the study: teams will need to redesign how they work, not simply add new tools. Commercialization took center stage at the EY-Nottingham Spirk Innovation Hub, where participants saw how integrated teams move from insight to prototype to market by combining design, disciplined processes and a strong understanding of customer needs. Tying the themes together, an evening with Narratize brought to life the conversations innovators are having about the future.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The future of R&D will depend on organizations' ability to build the capabilities needed to succeed in an AI-enabled, globally connected and increasingly complex innovation environment. Phase I diagnosed the challenge. The next phase asks what we do about it. Join the IRI in exploring how to prepare for this future.