

Leading Beyond the Lab

Catching up with Mark Smerznak

Profile: 2013 Shaping Innovation Leaders Alumnus

With more than three decades of global R&D leadership, Mark Smerznak has spent his career helping some of the world's leading consumer products companies transform scientific expertise into business growth. Now Senior Vice President and Chief Research & Development Officer at The Clorox Company, he leads the company's global R&D organization, driving innovation strategy, advancing technical capabilities, and building the teams that fuel long-term, profitable growth. His career has spanned five countries - including nearly two decades in China - and leadership roles ranging from digital innovation and open innovation to global capability development, giving him a unique perspective on how innovation organizations evolve and create value.

As an alumnus of IRI's Shaping Innovation Leaders (SIL) program, Mark recently joined fellow alumni in conversation to reflect on the pivotal moments that shaped his path, the leadership lessons that he learned along the way, and his management approach to balancing business and innovation.



“Think about your career like college majors and minors.”

**— Mark Smerznak, Senior Vice President
and Chief Research & Development
Officer, The Clorox Company**

For Mark, one message stands out for innovation leaders: Enterprise leadership requires more than technical excellence; the most effective innovation leaders help organizations make better decisions, build stronger teams, and create lasting value for consumers and the business.

He distilled this foundational message into the following principles:

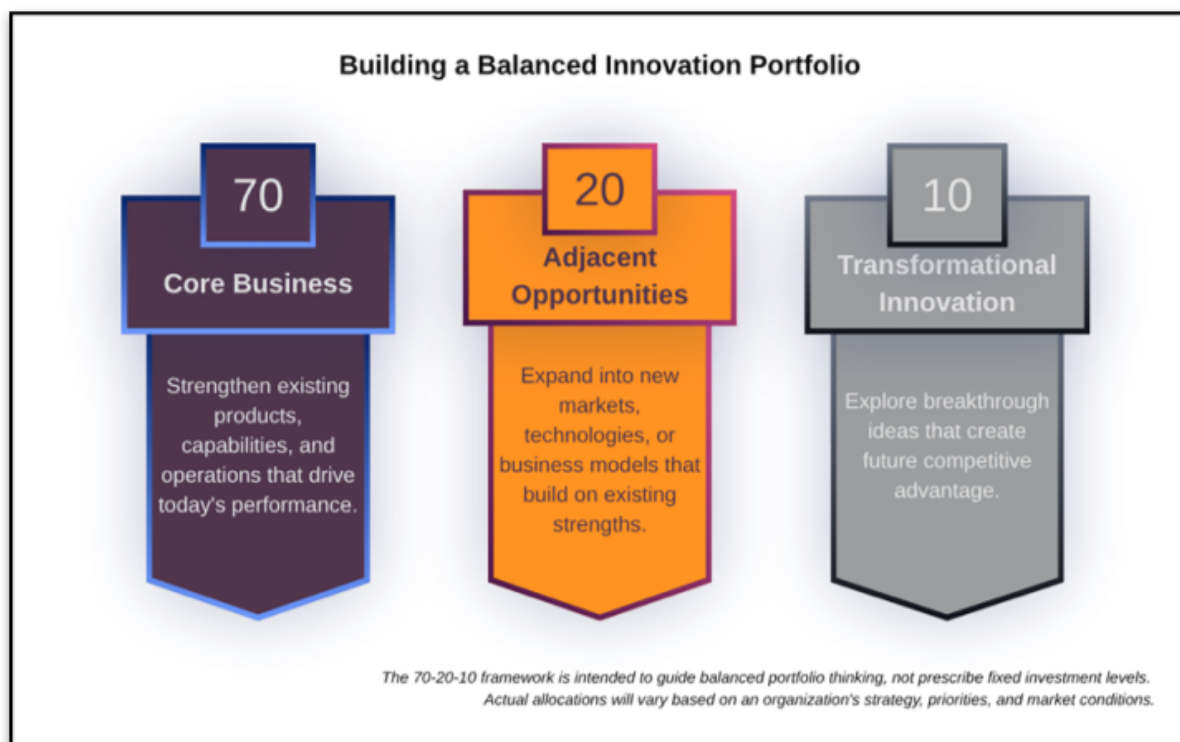
Great Careers Are Built Through Breadth, Not Just Depth

Every technical professional needs deep expertise, but enterprise leadership also requires breadth. In his conversation with fellow SIL alumni, Mark advised, “think about your career like college majors and minors” - a scientist’s functional major builds their credibility, while their minors expose them to adjacent disciplines, markets, and ways of solving problems. The broader their experience becomes, the easier it is to connect R&D, manufacturing, consumer insight, commercial strategy, and finance into better decisions. As careers progress, leaders are no longer responsible for advancing a technology or product alone - they are helping run a business. That broader responsibility requires understanding how the various corporate functions come together to create value.

Innovation Is a Portfolio of Choices

Mark’s reminder to SIL alumni was straightforward: “Don’t forget to focus on the core business.” Organizations can’t invest in tomorrow’s breakthroughs if they lose sight of the business that funds future innovation. The familiar 70-20-10 framework, which generally describes allocating most innovation resources to core improvements, some to adjacent opportunities, and a smaller share to transformational bets, is useful not because the percentages are universal, but because it reinforces the need to allocate resources intentionally across different levels of risk and return.

Organizations rarely have excess resources waiting for the next big idea. Instead, breakthrough innovations often begin by creating space within existing priorities, running focused experiments, and generating evidence before seeking broader investment.



R&D leaders need to find ways to create the space by continually increasing organizational efficiency and speed through new capabilities such as digital innovation and AI - this frees resourcing to invest in breakthrough innovation.

Organizations Innovate Through People

As R&D careers progress, success becomes less about producing the technical solution and more about enabling others to do their best work. Early career professionals are often rewarded for solving problems, while leaders are rewarded for developing people, shaping organizations, and influencing direction. Success is no longer measured by what leaders accomplish themselves, but by what others accomplish because of their leadership.

Senior leaders create impact by setting direction, developing talent, removing barriers, and building organizations that continue succeeding long after the leader has moved on. That requires balance; staying close enough to understand the work while giving others the space to lead, grow, and contribute. Organizations don't only innovate because they employ talented individuals, but more crucially, they innovate because talented individuals know how to work together.

Credibility Is Built Through Evidence, Curiosity, and Clear Communication

Leadership rarely means choosing between a right answer and a wrong answer. More often, it means balancing multiple right answers that compete with one another, to create a “third way” which takes the best of all possibilities. Strong data, thoughtful analysis, and clear communication help organizations understand what matters, why it matters, and what action should follow. Mark also credits concise writing and disciplined documentation for often creating more alignment than elaborate presentations. Clear thinking leads to clear communication - and clear communication builds trust.

Innovation Begins with the Consumer

Just as important is understanding whose problem R&D is trying to solve. Mark shared, “there is no ‘global’ consumer.” Markets differ. Cultures differ. Consumer expectations differ. While organizations benefit from common capabilities and scalable processes, meaningful innovation begins with understanding the unique needs of the people they serve. The strongest leaders stay close to consumers, challenge their own assumptions, and remain willing to adapt as they learn. While data should validate thinking and strategy, curiosity shapes the questions R&D should ask in the first place:

- Do consumers genuinely want the solution?
- Is the opportunity meaningful?
- Can the organization deliver it?
- Is there a sustainable competitive advantage?

From Technical Expertise to Enterprise Impact

Innovation has always been about more than technology. R&D leaders must connect scientific rigor with business strategy, consumer empathy with commercial insight, and individual expertise with organizational capability. Leadership is not about leaving technical expertise behind; it is about expanding that expertise into something broader, creating organizations that can innovate consistently, adapt confidently, and deliver lasting value.

The future of innovation will continue to be shaped by new technologies, changing consumer expectations, and evolving business models. But the leaders who thrive will be those who continue expanding their perspective - connecting technical expertise with business judgment, organizational leadership, and an unwavering focus on the consumer.

For Mark, participating in IRI's Shaping Innovation Leaders (SIL) program offered an opportunity to step back from the demands of leading a global R&D organization and reflect alongside fellow innovation executives. Sessions on negotiation, strategic networks, and executive leadership reinforced many of the lessons that had shaped his own career: broadening perspectives beyond technical expertise, building influence through relationships, and recognizing that leadership is ultimately about enabling people and organizations to succeed.

Visit <https://iriweb.org/track/shaping-innovation-leaders/> to learn more about the program.