THE DIGITAL LEADERSHIP AGENDA 2027

“Too many firms ask too little of *AI*.”

At the 11th Digital Leadership Agenda Conference, executives from Cisco, AWS, DoorDash, Mercedes-Benz, PIMCO, Rockwell Automation and more shared what it takes to recode a business at the speed of AI.

Sept. 23–24, 2026
Beckman Center of the National Academies of Sciences and Engineering, UC Irvine

RECODING BUSINESS AT THE SPEED OF AI

Vijay Gurbaxani has spent decades studying how technology reshapes business. Even he admits this moment is hard to take in.

"The AI tsunami is accelerating," he told a room of senior executives. "I find it all rather dizzying. This is what an industrial revolution feels like when you live in the midst of it."

Gurbaxani, director of the Center for Digital Transformation at UC Irvine's Paul Merage School of Business, led the center's 11th annual signature conference, The Digital Leadership Agenda 2027, Sept. 23 and 24 at the Beckman Center of the National Academies of Sciences and Engineering on the UC Irvine campus.

The theme was blunt: Recoding Business at the Speed of AI. The room was intentionally small, a C-suite-only gathering of executives, board members, investors and scholars.

It began on the evening of Sept. 23 with the big picture. PIMCO Chief Economist Tiffany Wilding described an AI investment boom on par with the internet buildout of the 1990s. A panel of leaders from Hitachi Energy, Intel, Rackspace and ECHO-ME.AI then followed the money down the AI supply chain, from semiconductors to sovereignty.

Opening night's panel on the economics of the AI supply chain, from semiconductors to sovereignty.

Executives gathered for dinner on the Beckman Center lawn on opening night.

Then the evening moved outdoors. After a benefactor welcome from leaders of Hitachi America, Rockwell Automation, Rackspace Technology, TAO Digital Solutions and CriticalRiver, executives sat down to dinner on the Beckman Center lawn. The small format, a deliberate shift from the 400-person conferences of earlier years, turned the night's big questions into table conversations among peers.

Dean Ian Williamson welcomes executives to the conference's main day.

DAY TWO · SEPT. 24

A new set of *questions to ask.*

The next morning, Dean Ian Williamson opened the main day by speaking to the value of the university and of gatherings like this one. He closed with a simple measure of success. If the executives left with a new set of questions to ask, he said, that would be a win.

Then Gurbaxani took the stage with the first question of the day.

Gurbaxani walks executives through how new knowledge expands the production frontier, the core idea behind the frontier firm.

"What can we do today that we could not do before?"

VIJAY GURBAXANI

His argument was direct. "Our research shows that too many firms ask too little of AI," he said. The question leaders should ask is simple: What can we do today that we could not do before? Companies that answer it boldly become what he calls frontier firms.

He pointed to Henry Ford, who used electricity to cut car assembly time from 12 hours to 90 minutes. Within a few years, more than 100 automakers that could not keep up were gone. He pointed to the ATM, once a competitive edge and now simply the cost of doing business.

And he pointed to Moderna, which he noted added roughly $44 billion in market value in a single day after announcing a personalized melanoma vaccine that AI helped design and deliver.

Then he reframed the topic most leaders struggle with, comparing a company to a racing sailboat. The faster you want to go, the bigger the sails. And the bigger the sails, the bigger the keel must be.

"People think of governance as slowing us down. I think of governance as creating the *foundation for speed.*"

VIJAY GURBAXANI

UNRECOGNIZABLE BY DESIGN

Gurbaxani in conversation with Cisco President and Chief Product Officer Jeetu Patel.

Next, Cisco President and Chief Product Officer Jeetu Patel showed what that speed looks like. Two years ago, he promised Cisco would become unrecognizable. And indeed it has transformed itself from a legacy company that wasn't especially relevant to the AI wave to one that is now actually powering the center of the wave.

Its AI data center orders climbed from near zero to $9.3 billion in the year that closed in July. Cisco is giving all of its 90,000 employees an agent to which they can delegate work.

> "Every year you almost have to start being unrecognizable from the previous year now, given the way that it's going."

AI, he said, is changing the dynamic of how the company operates and injecting a very different clock speed into the running of the business.

> "Productivity is the wrong *metric*."
>
> JEETU PATEL · CISCO

"I believe Cisco will employ more engineers," Patel said. His warning to every company in the room: within months, everyone will need an agent strategy.

VOICES FROM THE FRONTIER

Through the morning, one leader after another described what recoding a business looks like from the inside.

“At the end of the day, it’s a trust game.”

Asked how to become a frontier firm, he said Cotality spent a lot of time and effort on the semantic layer, the ontology of the property ecosystem and the housing industry, that ensures trusted answers for its clients.

JOHN ROGERS · CHIEF DATA AND ANALYTICS OFFICER, COTALITY

“One star in a galaxy of stars.”

The cultural shift Mercedes-Benz made, from the star at the top of the pyramid to a partner in a wider network.

PHILIPP SKOGSTAD · FORMER CEO, MERCEDES-BENZ R&D NORTH AMERICA

Rebuild each function from scratch with AI as the starting assumption. Then work backward.

He started college at 13 and earned his PhD at UC San Diego at 20.

KABIR NAGRECHA · CO-FOUNDER AND CEO, TESSERA LABS

“AI is not the future of software; it’s the future of labor.”

At one client, two lawyers who helped train Eudia’s AI on their expertise were then promoted to scale it across the legal department.

OMAR HAROUN · CO-FOUNDER AND CEO, EUDIA

Merage School professor Vibhanshu Abhishek with Cotality’s John Rogers.

THE HUMAN EDGE

“Intelligence is abundant, but *judgment is scarce.*”

CHRIS NARDECCHIA · ROCKWELL AUTOMATION

Kiva Allgood, Managing Director at the World Economic Forum, with Rockwell Automation’s Chris Nardecchia.

As the day went on, the most powerful theme turned out to be human. Chris Nardecchia, chief digital and information officer at Rockwell Automation, captured it in that one line.

Phil Potloff, general manager of AWS Marketplace, pushed back on fears about entry-level work. “I actually think it’s the best time ever to be a junior engineer,” he said. The real purpose of AI agents, he argued, is protecting people’s attention.

After lunch, the proof kept coming. DoorDash Chief Accounting Officer Gordon Lee described junior accountants with zero coding skills building 80 bots in two weeks.

And in the day’s final panel, Zimmer Biomet’s Shaun Braun named the stakes for anyone handing decisions to machines. One serious failure, he said, can put a company on the front page and cost it customer trust for good.

WHERE LEADERSHIP MATTERS

When the last panel wrapped that afternoon, Gurbaxani returned to the stage to close the conference. By the dean's measure, the day was a win. The executives headed home with a new set of questions to ask, starting with the one Gurbaxani posed that morning: What can we do today that we could not do before?

For the Merage School, the work reaches straight into the classroom. Professor Vibhanshu Abhishek, who moderated two sessions, said tomorrow's graduates will need to think as system designers and architects. They will inherit the organizations being rebuilt right now.

It brings everything back to the challenge Gurbaxani issued that morning. He had ended his keynote with Pope Leo's first encyclical, which centers on safeguarding the human person. "Technology should serve humans," he said. "That is my challenge to all of you."

"Our challenge is big, but this is where *leadership matters.*"

VIJAY GURBAXANI